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Mysterious Mr. Howard

By John R. Musick,

Author of "The Columbian Historical Novels," etc.

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A Novel.

BY

JOHN R. MUSICK,

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PRESS OF
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MYSTERIOUS MR. HOWARD.

CHAPTER I.

AT NEWBURG TAVERN.

NEWBURG was once a thriving little Missouri village, and a popular candidate for the county seat, but the Civil War stopped its growth and dwarfed its ambition. After the war, the long contemplated railroad, which was to make of Newburg a prosperous Western city, came, but missed the village by five miles, and established the rival town of Rushville. From that day Newburg began to decline. The "big road," once traversed triweekly by the great six-horse stage, became a path, and the continued encroachments of grass and weeds bade fair to hide it from sight. For a while the inhabitants of Newburg made a desperate fight against the rival town, but one by one were compelled to yield. The blacksmith moved his shop to the railroad town, and the carpenter thought he would fare better by doing the same. The merchant discovered he could no longer sell goods at a

profit in Newburg, and thus one by one the inhabitants left, until the village was little more than a cluster of deserted houses, which the forest and weeds threatened to bury with the road.

There was one stubborn man, however, who refused to leave the deserted village. It was Uncle Reuben Price, who kept the old-fashioned tavern. He had been a prominent man in the village in its prosperous days, when his tavern was crowded with guests and the great overland stage made his inn headquarters. Uncle Reuben had never recovered from the blow that had fallen on his village, and bade fair to go to ruin with it. He hated the railroad and rival town which had ruined his business, and declared he preferred to starve in Newburg rather than prosper in Rushville. His tavern, like himself, was old and gloomy. The weatherboarding had not seen paint for years. The old-fashioned sign creaked in the wind, and the pigweed, jimson and wild mustard grew close to the door.

Uncle Reuben and Aunt Rachel, with two ancient colored servants, Cater and Aunt Aggy, were the only inhabitants of the old house. Uncle Reuben and Aunt Rachel were childless, which everybody thought a blessing, for what child, youth or maiden could ever be happy in so gloomy a place as the old Newburg tavern? Two more families lived in the neighborhood of the village. One was the Widow Nielson and her children, who lived in a house over the hill, and Samuel Newton, whose farm "cornered with the town."

A strange place, indeed, for a bright and happy young girl to come and spend her vacation, yet Mr. Jordan Wells, a brother-in-law of Uncle Reuben, and a prosperous merchant in Wellsville, notified the old people he was going to send his daughter Flora to spend the summer and autumn with them. Uncle Reuben and Aunt Rachel would not have been more surprised had they been informed that the governor would stop with them, and began to speculate on the strange conduct of Jordan Wells. Uncle Reuben lit his pipe and asked his better half :

"When did you see Flora last?"

"Been five years, Rube. She warn't nothin' but a child then."

"How old is she now?"

"She must be eighteen. I guess she 's a young woman, an' I 'm afraid won't find this old, gloomy house very invitin'."

"If she don't like it she needn't stay."

"I guess Jordan sent her here t' keep her away from Horace Rathburne."

"Who 's Horace Rathburne?" asked Uncle Reuben, without removing his pipe.

"I don't know, but I 'll bet my head it 's some feller that fell in love with Flora, an' he 's a-sendin' her here t' git rid of him."

"Some onnery good-for-nothing scamp."

Next day Flora Wells came. She was brought from the depot in a carriage, with her trunk strapped on behind. Aunt Rachel met her with a kiss, and hoped she "wouldn't git homesick in this

old house." Flora was very pretty, very plump, with blue eyes and golden hair; but her cheek was stained with tears, and she seemed so sad that the good-hearted Aunt Rachel called to the black woman:

"Come here, Aggy, and help the poor child up t' th' east room we fixed fur her."

"Yes, missus."

"Cater, help this man carry up the luggage."

"Yes, missus. Ole Cater look arter dat. Golly, boss," he said to the driver, who was helping him with the large trunk, "et seem mos' like ole times t' tote a trunk upstairs."

Flora looked the picture of despair when she reached the apartment designed for her, and sinking into an old, well-worn arm-chair, burst into tears. Aunt Aggy's heart was touched. She leaned against the mantel, and with every lineament of her ebony face depicting deep, heartfelt sympathy, said:

"Now, chile, dar am sumfin a breakin' yo' po' little heart. Won't you tell Aunt Aggy? Dis hain't all homesickness, I know it hain't. What am it?"

"I can't tell now, Aunt Aggy. I am very foolish to give way to this, but I can't help it. Leave me, and I will be better soon."

Left alone, the heart-broken girl closed and bolted her door and again fell into the chair and wept.

In order that the reader may not be kept in suspense, we will state that the surmises of Aunt

Rachel were correct. Flora's father had in his employ a young man named Horace Rathburne. He was an active, intelligent, industrious young fellow of twenty-three, but cursed with that common enemy of genius, poverty. His father had been a soldier, and was killed during the war, and his mother had been an invalid for years. That Horace, whom Mr. Wells had taken into his store to keep from the poorhouse, should presume to love the only daughter of the rich merchant, was too absurd for Mr. Wells to seriously consider at first.

But Cupid plays strange pranks, and when the little mischief-maker has decided upon a victim, poverty, station, society and rank cut no figure. Horace Rathburne loved, and his love was returned. The apprehensions of the father were at last roused, and he began to watch his daughter. The heightened color of her cheek, the increased brilliancy of her eye when in Horace's presence, with the confusion of the young man, confirmed what had at first been only a fear or suspicion, and it all ended in his discharging his faithful clerk and sending his daughter to this out-of-the-way place to forget her lover.

When the noon meal was ready, Aunt Rachel went up for Flora, who was in a calmer state and seemingly partially reconciled.

"Now come down, child," said Aunt Rachel, kindly. "Dinner 's ready. We hain't got much, but what we have yer welcome to. I want t' ask ye all about yer ma—and the other folks."

Uncle Reuben, Aunt Rachel and Flora were all who sat at table that day. As Aunt Rachel "helped Flora's plate," she kept up a running fire of questions about her father and mother, and why she came to spend her vacation in Newburg.

"I did not know I was coming until I started," the poor girl answered.

"Oh, yes, yer pa saw ye war too close confined in that 'cademy, an' sent ye here fur fresh air. Well, thank th' Lord, we got plenty o' that, though we hain't much else."

Though, as we have seen from her remarks, Aunt Rachel had strong suspicions of the truth, she did not mention Horace Rathburne. She tried to make Flora happy, and resolved in her own mind that she would make inquiry about Horace Rathburne, and if he "warn't too bad," she would help Flora out, even if she made an everlasting enemy of Jordan Wells.

"I don't believe in lettin' poverty break hearts," she declared to her husband when they were alone.

"Better break hearts than starve bodies," grumly replied Uncle Reuben, lighting his pipe.

The sun, like a great ball of fire, was hidden behind a mass of somber-hued clouds banked up along the western horizon. Uncle Reuben and Aunt Rachel were sitting on the long, old-fashioned porch, as they had sat day after day for years, looking for custom which never came. Their lonely lives were filled with sadness and disappointment, and they could sympathize with the heart-

broken girl sent to them by a stern father who believed he was doing a sacred duty. They gazed down that road which year by year was growing more dim with disuse, and their minds went back to a bright, happy past, gone forever. In her large room, *en déshabillé*, sat the lonely girl, far from her lover. How far she knew not, for she knew not the whereabouts of the wanderer. The subdued glow of the sun's fading light fell on her dimpled shoulders warm and white, while her pretty, sorrowful face bent over two precious treasures she had carried next her heart, making a sad but pretty picture. One of these treasures was the photograph of a young man of twenty-three, whose large, dark eyes gazed with a lifelike fondness on her face. It was an open, manly face, just such as would appeal to the love of a sensible girl.

The second treasure was a letter hastily written with a pencil. The words were few, but, coming from the heart, to her they spoke volumes. The letter was as follows:

"DEAR FLORA: That I regret the harsh act of your father, I need not tell you, for you know it. As he is your father, I must respect him and believe he thinks he is acting for your best interest. In anything else I would respect his wishes, but until you reject me yourself I shall fondly cling to the hope that you will one day be mine to love, cherish and protect forever. My heart can never be another's, for you have it entirely. Wherever I go, wherever you may be sent, I will contrive some way to find you. I shall seek employment in another town, and as soon as I am settled will find means to communicate with you and see you as soon as possible. An interview now would be imprudent, if not impossible, as it would only heighten your father's anger and make him more stubborn. Adieu, dearest.

"HORACE."

She fondly pressed the note and photograph to her lips again, murmuring:

"Dear, dear Horace, where are you to-night? Oh, I will pray God every day to help us in this terrible ordeal! In Him alone must we now hope."

While the unfortunate girl was weeping and praying in her apartment, struggling between the love of parents and her betrothed, Uncle Reuben watched the light fade from the landscape; then knocking the ashes from his pipe, and turning to his wife with a sigh, said:

"No custom to-night, Rachel."

He had made the same remark day after day since the village had begun to fall to decay. His voice was mournful, and as he bowed his gray head in his hands, he was a pitiful object. Aunt Rachel made no answer. She was knitting her husband's stockings, and having dropped a stitch, was struggling in the uncertain light to "pick it up." She was about to suggest that they go in, when there fell on her ears the distant sound of wheels.

"Rube! Rube! somebody is coming!"

He started, as if he expected to see the old six-horse stage coming back loaded with passengers, and his dull ears almost fancied they once more heard the music of the driver's horn that had so often gladdened his heart. A great, dark object was certainly coming up the disused road from the bridge that spanned the stream on the west, and he saw in the deepening twilight the form of a man on the box holding the reins, driving a spirited team.

"Rachel! Rachel!" he cried, starting to his feet, "am I gone crazy, or is the old stage come back!"

"No, Rube, 't ain't. It 's one o' them close carriages. What on airth is it comin' here fur?"

The carriage was driven up to the old stiles, the door opened, and a tall, pleasant-faced gentleman got out and advanced toward the porch.

"Is this the Newburg tavern?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Are you Mr. Price, the proprietor?"

"I am," Uncle Reuben answered, rising

"Could you board a lady and two children for awhile?"

"I guess so."

With a Missourian "I guess so" is as much an affirmative as yes.

"Do you have many customers?" asked the tall man.

Aunt Rachel could not repress a smile, for since the deer-hunters of the winter before, their tavern had not had a guest until Flora's arrival.

"We ain't no one now but my niece," Uncle Reuben answered.

"That 's well," remarked the tall man, thoughtfully. "We want a quiet place."

"Are you goin' to stay with 'em?"

"I shall be here occasionally."

"Well, if yer folks are in th' carriage, hev 'em git out, an' I 'll call Cater t' carry in th' luggage an' put up th' hosses."

"The carriage will not remain, sir."

The tall stranger went to the carriage and assisted

a pretty woman of twenty-seven and her two children, a boy of five or six and a girl of three, to alight. It was plain to be seen they were his wife and children.

Cater carried two trunks up to the room the newcomers were to occupy. They were well dressed and had airs of urbanity, indicating education and refinement. The lady, a quiet little woman, seemed resigned to this out-of-the-way home, as a model Christian wife and mother should be.

"What 's yer name, mister?" asked Uncle Reuben, when the stranger had seen his wife and children to their apartment.

"Thomas Howard," was the answer.

"Have you folks had supper?" asked Aunt Rachel, putting her head into the room of the Howards.

"Yes, it was early, though. You may bring my wife a cup of tea, if you please."

"Aggy—Aunt Aggy!" called the hostess at the kitchen-door, a moment later. "A cup of tea fur Mis' Howard at once!"

"'Fore de Lawd, fo' mo' boa'ders!" chuckled Aunt Aggy, as she hastened to draw the tea. "Bet dey find dat Newburg 'mount ter sumfin' yit."

When the cup of tea was passed in, the door was closed, and no more was seen of the Howards until next morning. Shortly after breakfast Cater took Uncle Reuben aside and whispered:

"Dar am a big black hoss in the stable, sah, which dat Massa Howard say am his, but how dit et get dah?"

"Feed and curry it, Cater. 'Tain't none o' our

business, so he pays fur it," said Uncle Reuben, feeling in his pocket for tobacco to light his pipe.

Mr. Howard remained all the day in the house with his family, but when evening had come he tenderly kissed them adieu, and mounting that "big black horse," galloped down the road.

CHAPTER II.

THE STANDISH BANK ROBBED.

It was one of those intensely hot afternoons in Missouri, when exertion is torture and existence a bore. The sun beat down on the glittering clay-hill roads leading into the dull, lazy little town of Standish, and the hot, quivering air was not stirred by a single zephyr. It being the farmers' busy season, Standish was unusually dull. The merchant spent the morning hours pulling weeds from his garden, while the clerk lolled on the counter and pored over the contents of a three-day-old paper. In the afternoon the merchant sat on the shady porch in front of his store in his shirt sleeves, fanning himself with a broad, palm-leaf fan, while the clerk within closed a bargain with a sixteen-

year-old girl for the sale of a paper of pins and a spool of thread, and talked of the coming picnic.

The ring of the blacksmith's hammer was the only indication of industry. A farmer had come to town to get the cycle of his machine mended.

The cashier, bookkeeper and clerk of the Standish bank were at their desks, occasionally glancing at the hands of the clock on the wall, and wishing they could go to the cool river and plunge their hot bodies into it.

Standish was a small place of not more than fifteen hundred or two thousand inhabitants, but the merchants did a thriving business when the harvest did not keep the farmers at home. At this season of the year the vaults of the bank were uncommonly well filled with money. Cattle-dealers were waiting for the fall trade to open, and consequently had deposited their funds. Many farmers had sold their early wheat, which, with the money of the great lumber mill on the stream, swelled the deposits to twice the usual amount.

All the people of Standish were not noted for their thrift or industry. Like all villages, Standish had its proportion of loafers, men who spent most of their time on the streets, doing just enough odd jobs to support them. It was a hard season on loafers. There was no food for gossip, no excitement, and nothing beyond the dull routine of sitting on dry-goods boxes, whittling and telling stale jokes.

On the porch in front of John Layman's store sat Enoch Ralls and Cris Martin, two typical Missouri

village loafers, who worked just enough to keep from being classed vagrants.

"It 's powerful hot," said Enoch, taking his red bandanna handkerchief and mopping the bald place on his head.

"Ef et don't rain soon, dust 'll blamed nigh choke us."

"Hain't been nuff for a month t' lay th' dust."

"Everybody must be mighty busy; it 's gittin' along in th' evenin' an' hain't been ten people in town t' day."

"All busy in th' harvest, I reckin."

"'Spect they air."

"Well, that 'll soon be over, and then I reckin we 'll see somebody."

Then Cris Martin took off his hat to scratch his head. As he did so a noise from the long bridge which spanned the stream southeast of the town reached his ears, and looking in that direction, he saw two horsemen cross it and come up the hill toward them. They looked like plain, unassuming farmers, wearing broad-brimmed white hats and long linen ulsters.

"See them fellers, Enoch?" asked Cris.

"Yes."

"But they ride dog on good hosses."

"They do, sure as you 're a foot high."

"Believe they 're comin' this way, too."

"'Pears like it."

"Wonder who they air?"

"Cattle buyers, hoss buyers, sheep buyers, ur suthin' o' th' kind."

Just then Enoch chanced to glance up the street north of the town, and declared:

"Dog on me, ef thar don't come two more, Cris."

"From the north?"

"Yes."

"D' ye know 'em?"

"Never sot eyes on 'em afore, an' wouldn't know 'em from a side o' sole leather."

At this moment Jack Auglin, a third companion, came from the store.

"D' ye see them fellers?" he asked, pointing to the horsemen.

"Yes."

"Know 'em?"

"No; d' you?"

"Never saw 'em. Wonder who they air?"

Enoch, who was well informed on all subjects, expressed it as his opinion they were sheep buyers. The "hull country" was full of them. Sim Dodson told him that two were at his house the week before. Jack Auglin looked down the street, west, and said:

"Thar 's two more."

The advent of the six strange horsemen coming from different directions was enough to fill the three loafers with conjecture and excitement. The two men, who had been sitting, rose to their feet. Enoch threw away the stick he had been whittling and pulled his hat down over his bald head.

"Maybe they are cattle buyers," said Jack Auglin, who remembered that he had heard something of those men being in the country.

Cris Martin was certain they must be horse buyers. The newcomers seemed destined to meet at a point near the crossing between the store and the bank. All six met here, and began to scrape up acquaintance in real old Missouri fashion.

"Howdy?" said the large man on the brown horse to the large man on the bay horse.

"Purty well, stranger. How 's yerself?"

"Fust rate. Buyin' sheep?"

"No. I 'm buyin' cattle."

"I 'm after sheep; thought you mought be in the same business. How are cattle, anyway?"

"They 're holdin' 'm too high. Thar 's a little bunch down th' river, but I can't touch 'em with a ten-foot pole."

By this time the three gentlemen of leisure of Standish and a dozen more were about the newcomers. Any excitement in the village was eagerly sought by the loafers. The village, which had seemed almost depopulated but a short time before, was now filled with life, and men and boys came creeping from the houses and shady places to learn the cause of that gathering on the corner.

Two more strange horsemen had come up and joined the others, who were discussing stock markets and prices asked by farmers.

"I tell ye, stranger," remarked the man on the large brown horse, "we can't do anything as long as they hold their stock at sich prices. A feller up th' river who had a little bunch o' steers wanted four cents on foot. We come away an' left 'im."

"Purty fine hoss ye ride," said the man on the bay.

"Ye hit it that time, stranger. He 's a mighty good hoss."

"How 'll ye swap?"

"I dun know."

"Now this critter hain't no crowbait."

"No, he 's a right good-lookin' annermil."

"Well, if we can't buy sheep nur cattle, maybe we can make a dicker* on a hoss-trade."

"How much boot will ye give?"

"Boot?"

"Certainly. Ye don't think I am goin' t' swap even?" returned the man on the dark brown.

The man on the bay laughed.

"Oh, I see ye don't want to trade.'"

"Yes, I do."

"How old is that hoss?"

"Five next spring. How old 's yourn?"

"The same."

Enoch Ralls, who prided himself on his judgment in horseflesh, nudged Jack Auglin and remarked:

"That brown hoss is a blamed good un, lemme tell ye."

"You bet he is," answered Jack.

"Both mighty good critters," thought Cris Martin.

"Yes, but that brown hoss is wuth fifty dollars mor n the bay," declared Enoch Ralls.

Meanwhile, the two strangers, who had been "talking trade" all the while, had dismounted, in order more carefully to inspect the objects of bar-

* Some of the words in this chapter are local to Missouri, but their meanings are so clear that definition is not necessary.

ter. The sun had sunk so low its heat was not quite so oppressive, and the inhabitants of Standish were venturing to the streets and asking one another what that crowd over by the bank was doing. Little did they imagine that a bold outrage was about to be committed—a crime that would impoverish the little town and ruin scores of its people. The large man who owned the brown horse went to the bay, opened its mouth, glanced at its teeth, and said:

"I 'll tell ye what I 'll do. I 'll take fifty dollars to boot."

"Fifty dollars?"

"Yes."

"No, ye won't."

"Then we won't trade."

"Why, man, yer crazy."

"Good by—"

The owner of the dark-brown horse put his foot in the stirrup to mount, when the other stranger said:

"Hold on—don't fly off th' handle that way."

"How much will ye give?"

"Twenty-five."

"No use to talk with you."

"Well, fall a little, won't ye

"I 'll knock off five dollars."

"Oh, yer away off. I 'll make it thirty."

"Say, there 's only fifteen dollars atween ye; can't ye split the difference?" ventured Enoch. It was nothing in the world to him, but having no business of his own, he busied himself with other people's affairs.

"Now that's sensible. Let's split the difference?" suggested the man with the bay.

It terminated with their coming to an agreement of thirty-seven dollars and fifty cents as the price between the two horses.

The owner of the bay began counting out the money. Turning to the man with whom he had made the deal, he said:

"Here's a twenty-dollar bill; kin ye bust it fur me?"

"No, I can't," the owner of the dark brown answered.

"Kin you?" turning to Enoch. Enoch had not been the possessor of half that sum in five years. He shook his head solemnly, saying:

"I hain't any small change."

Then he turned to the other horsemen, but each shook his head in turn, until some one suggested that maybe it could be changed in the bank.

"Yes, ye can git it changed thar. John Wiseman will change it for ye," put in Enoch Ralls.

"Wall, let's go on an' do it," said the owner of the dark brown.

"Come on."

"Hold our hosses, boys."

Two of the strange horsemen took the reins of their horses, and as the two men walked away toward the bank, one was heard to remark:

"I'm givin' you too much."

"No, it's me as is takin' too little."

They disappeared in the bank, and Enock took his friends around the recent objects of barter,

pointing out their good qualities, and elevating himself in their estimation as a judge of horseflesh. Suddenly there came from the bank angry voices, the sharp report of a pistol, a yell of pain and fear and some one running from the rear of the building, cried:

"They are robbing the bank!"

In an instant a terrible change had come over the horsemen in the street. They snatched revolvers from under those long, linen ulsters, and, flourishing them before the crowd that was frozen with amazement and dread, shouted:

"Git out o' th' way! Run for yer lives!" and commenced firing at the people so recklessly that the crowd took to their heels. Enoch Ralls and Jack Auglin wheeled to fly with the others, ran into and tumbled over each other, and one of the horses, frightened by the incessant flashes and reports of pistols, leaped over them, throwing its rider, who fell on Enoch's back. His wig and false whiskers were knocked off in the fall, and Enoch and Jack Auglin saw the face of a handsome young man.

The two men who had gone into the bank to get the bill changed came out with all the cash of the institution, save thirty-seven cents in pennies, which they did not wait to gather up. They carried their ill-gotten booty in a bag, which was slung over the horn of the saddle on the dark-brown horse. The man who had fallen leaped behind one of his companions, and all galloped away.

"I know one on 'em! I'd swear t' one on 'em!" cried Enoch.

"So would I!" yelled Jack Auglin.

They ran to the nearest house, from which they watched the eight bandits fly down the street, across the bridge and disappear in the forest.

CHAPTER III.

ARREST OF THE LOVER.

Life at the old Newburg tavern was dull to Flora. The monotonous days dragged slowly by, while she sat by her window gazing down the great old, disused road, wondering if he would come. She cried until it made her eyes red, and then dried her tears, for it would be "awful" for Horace to see her with red eyes. Aunt Rachel tried to console her, but the good-natured old lady made so many blunders that she gave up in despair, feeling sure she had only made matters worse. Mrs. Howard, the newcomer, proved a very quiet little body, spending most of her time with her children. One seldom saw ber save at the table, and she hardly ever left the house, except to take a short stroll with her children after the sun had set.

The little boy, Jesse, who had his father's steel-

blue eyes and clear complexion, was a bright little fellow, and made many remarks beyond his age.

One day, Cater, who had been to Rushville for the mail, brought the weekly county paper for Uncle Reuben. The old man interested himself in it during the afternoon, and when they had gathered around the tea-table, said :

"Thar 's been another awful bank robbery."

"Where was it ?" asked Aunt Rachel.

"At Standish."

"How fur is that from here ?"

"'Bout fifty or sixty miles."

"How was it done ?" inquired the quiet little Mrs. Howard.

"Th' papers say 'twas the boldest robbery ever known. They went into th' town in broad daylight, an' took all th' money from th' bank, except thirty-seven cents."

Mrs. Howard asked :

"And have they recovered none of the money nor caught the robbers ?"

"Not one."

"I don't see why they don't catch 'em an' do somethin' with 'em," declared Aunt Rachel.

"Yes, catch 'em an' hang 'em !" put in little Jesse.

"There, there, dear ! Remember that little boys should be seen and not heard," said the mother.

"But ain't they bad men, mamma ?"

"It 's not your place to discuss them." And a smile played over the pale face of the mother as she gazed fondly at her boy.

"Bet I do, when I grow big."

"Yes, he will," declared Aunt Rachel, giving the lad an admiring glance across the table. "He's going to be a big man one day, and bank robbers won't dare to fool around where he is."

Mrs. Howard turned to Flora and asked:

"How are you going to spend the afternoon?"

The pretty, sad face turned to the quiet little lady, and in an absent-minded, far-off manner, she answered:

"I don't know."

"Are you lonesome in your room?"

"I know she must be," interrupted Aunt Rachel. "I'm afeerd she ain't enjoyin' her visit t' Newburg one bit. She jist sits up thar an' mopes an' mopes all th' time."

Uncle Reuben, who sometimes made a feeble effort at a joke, remarked, with a smile on his usually glum face:

"Maybe she is in love."

A little crimson flush swept over the fair face, but it was gone in an instant. Aunt Rachel, who had observed it, was quick to rebuke her husband:

"You ort t' be ashamed o' yerself, Rube, t' plague th' child that way. Don't mind him, Flora. Yer uncle's gittin' old an' talks silly ez a child."

Flora made no response, and the meal proceeded. Mrs. Howard, whose quick eye had discerned that Flora's heart was heavy, whispered in her ear as they rose from the table:

"Let us take a stroll in the woods this afternoon."

"I am afraid to go far," Flora answered, as, with a shudder, she glanced toward the great dark wood. "We might get lost."

"We need not go far," argued Mrs. Howard. There was nothing better for the sad girl, and she assented. "I will let the children play in the back-yard, and give Aunt Aggy a quarter to watch them," added Mrs. Howard.

Aunt Aggy was seen, and consented to "look after them chillan jist ez well ez der own mammy would."

With this assurance the two prepared to set forth on their stroll. The afternoon was sultry, and the dark shades of the forest were cool and inviting. The blue jays and a host of feathered warblers were making the wood melodious with song. A short, soft grass, which in Missouri loves to carpet unfrequented paths, had spread a soft, green covering over the one they were to follow.

"I think there is no danger of losing our way if we follow this path and return by it," said Mrs. Howard.

"If we don't go too far," answered Flora.

"We will be careful. Come, let us have a walk that will bring back the bloom to your cheek." As they tripped down the path which led to a stream half a mile away, Mrs. Howard said: "Flora, you are sad."

Flora was silent.

"I wish I could aid you, my dear girl," and she turned her soft brown eyes, full of tender sympathy, on the sorrowing maiden.

"Mrs. Howard, I know how you feel, and I thank you; but my sorrow is one which friendship cannot heal, and it would be presumptuous in me to burden a stranger with my afflictions."

"Alas, poor girl! I can read your heart; and though I have never heard your sad story, I almost know it. I am not seeking to probe secrets which must be precious to you. Though I long to aid you, I can only sympathize and hope that this thorn may be moved from your flesh in time."

They reached the stream, a romantic, wild little rivulet, with mossy bank and miniature cascade. They sat on the bank a long while gazing on the sparkling waters forming a tiny rainbow and listening to the music which seemed to lull one to repose. At last Flora fixed her eyes on Mrs. Howard and asked:

"Have you ever known grief?"

"I have drained the bitter cup to its dregs, my dear," answered Mrs. Howard, while her thin lips closed tightly. Her eye, which was usually bright, seemed dimmed for a moment, then brightened again. "Why do you ask, Flora?"

"I wonder if sorrow is the lot of every one."

"It seems to be so, Flora."

"Yet some pass through the world with no visible shadow."

"Ah, child, we can't see the heart! Nothing is more hypocritical than a smile and an air of cheerfulness. If this veil of deceit could be lifted, how few hearts would be found happy; none absolutely so. If it is not one care or grief, it is another."

"Were you ever surrounded by misery and despair so dark that you could see no light beyond, and felt as if you would perish?"

"Frequently, my child."

"And lived?"

"Yes, my child. Grief may long be born ere sorrow snaps the brittle thread of life. I have learned to wait, hope and pray."

Flora turned her face, upon which there was the faintest glow, to her companion, and said:

"You have spoken two of the sweetest words I ever heard—*hope and pray.* I have prayed, now I will hope."

Then they sat a long time in silence listening to the murmur of the waters. The sun was low in the western heavens, when the instincts of a mother warned the little woman that it was time to go.

"Let us return; it is getting late and the children may want me."

Flora rose to follow her, when she discovered four horsemen coming toward them. They were fierce-looking men, with short Winchester rifles hanging at their saddles.

"Who are they, Mrs. Howard?" cried Flora, timidly clinging to her companion.

"Peace, child! Surely they will not harm us."

When they had come within speaking distance, one tipped his hat and asked:

"Do you ladies live near?"

"We are staying at the Newburg tavern, and came out for a little stroll."

"Well, don't be skeered, for we ain't goin' to hurt

ye. All we want to know is if ye 's seed anybody since ye left th' house?"

"No, sir; no one."

"Good day!" And the horsemen rode on, disappearing in the woods.

"Mrs. Howard, what do they mean? Who are they?"

Mrs. Howard, who was trembling like a leaf, answered:

"I cannot understand them. Let us return to the house."

The first person they met on returning was old Cater, and they related their adventure to him, and asked him who these strange armed horsemen could be.

"Why, bress de Lawd, I dun know!" answered Cater. "Dar am a hull passel o' men in de woods on hossback a-ridin' about like dey war a-huntin' deah. But 'tain't time fur the hunters, 'deed 'tain't."

Aunt Rachel had tea early that evening. The sun had not yet dipped behind the western hills, though the lengthening shadows told that it was low. Flora, who had never been able to get those horsemen out of her mind, went to the cow lot to watch Aunt Rachel and Aggy milk the cows, hoping to forget the scene in the woods. A grove of beautiful hickory-trees seemed to invite her to their sylvan shades, and she strolled to them. The great road, or what had once been the great road, was not far. She had often gazed down the dim old path, and wondered where it led. The brow of the hill

was not far away, and at the side of the path was a large white stump in the shade of a large old oak. It was an inviting seat, and some power seemed to draw her to it.

She was scarcely seated on it, when the ring of iron-shod hoofs from down the road reached her ears, and she saw a horseman coming up the hill. Filled with an unknown dread, she turned to fly, when a voice called :

" Stop, Flora, stop !"

That voice ! Oh, Heaven, she would know it among a thousand. She tried to speak, to shriek with joy, but her tongue seemed powerless to utter a syllable. The woods swam before her, and had she not clung to the stump, she would have fallen. Next moment a tall, dark, handsome young man leaped from his saddle and seized the half-fainting girl in his arms, while he whispered :

" Look up, Flora, look up ! It is I."

She felt his warm breath on her cheek, she heard his beloved voice in her ear, and clinging to him as if she feared he would vanish into air, she sobbed :

" Horace—Horace !"

" It is I, love. Are you not glad to see me ?"

" Yes, yes ! Heaven only knows how happy I am !"

Aunt Rachel and Aggy, hearing her cry, started and gazed in amazement on the scene. Aunt Rachel, not understanding the strange affair, and having a vague impression that the stranger was going to harm her niece, seized the stick she used to beat off the calves, when Aggy seized her arm, and whispered :

"Stop, missus, doan 'sturb um. Doan ye see him buss her? Dat 's her lover fellah!"

By this time the strange, complicated affair became more clear to Aunt Rachel, and she dropped her calf-stick, though she could not resist the temptation to cast occasional glances at the lovers, and wonder what he was like. Pretty Flora clung to him trembling like a captured bird, her tears of joy coursing down her pretty cheeks.

"Flora, will you forgive me for coming against your father's wish? I must see you occasionally, or I shall die," he whispered in those soft, low tones which never failed to thrill her soul. She was about to speak, to tell him how freely she forgave him, when there was a clatter of horses' feet, the iron shoes scattering the gravel in every direction, and the four horsemen who had frightened her at the creek galloped up to within a few paces of them, and leveling their guns on her lover, cried:

"Young man, surrender, or we will blow your head from your shoulders!"

For a moment Horace gazed at them in silent amazement, then demanded:

"What does this mean?"

"Well, we expected that," said one of the horsemen. "Of course, you plead innocence and ignorance, but you are our prisoner all the same. We were told you would come to this house, and all we had to do was to watch it and you would fall in the trap."

"Sir!" cried Horace, indignantly. "I demand an explanation."

"All right; you can have it," said the man, dismounting. "I am the sheriff, and have a warrant for your arrest. Keep him covered, boys, he is a dangerous fellow, and if he makes a move, shoot him dead in his tracks!"

"For what am I arrested?" he asked.

"You already know, but I don't mind telling you. You were one of the gang who robbed the bank at Standish."

"It is false!"

"Yes, we expected that. Stand aside, young lady. We certainly don't want to harm you, but that man is a dangerous Missouri bank-robber, and we may have to shoot him," said the sheriff, drawing a pair of handcuffs.

"Oh, sir, he is innocent! He is innocent!" began Flora, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"There—there, Flora, don't!" pleaded the lover. "This is some stupid mistake. Mr. Sheriff, you shall suffer for this."

"I will take all the risk. Throw up your hands, or you are a dead man!"

The sheriff was a novice in the business, and determined not to take any risk.

"Flora, don't be alarmed," Horace whispered. "This can all be explained—"

The officer slipped the handcuffs on his wrists, interrupting him with:

"Make your explanations in court, Mr. Rathburne, but you will pass the night in jail."

With a shriek, Flora fell in a swoon; and Aunt Rachel, again seizing her stick, and followed by

Aggy with a similar one, made a gallant charge to the rescue.

"Hold on, good woman!" said the sheriff, quietly. "We know what we are about. This man is Horace Rathburne. He was one of the band who robbed the Standish bank the other day. His disguise fell off, and two men who know him saw his face and will swear it was him. We were told he had a sweetheart here, and if we would only watch your house we would be sure to catch him." The sheriff then turned to his prisoner, and added: "Come, young man, we'll tie you on your horse, and be going."

"One moment!" he cried. And breaking from the man who held him, manacled as he was, he bent over the insensible girl, and pressing a burning kiss on her clay-cold lips, arose and said: "I am ready!"

He was immediately placed on his horse, and, surrounded by the strong guard, hurried away. Aunt Rachel, on whose mind the whole terrible truth dawned, sank helpless at the roadside, and, turning to Aggy, said:

"Take her up and carry her t' th' house. Poor girl! Oh, Heaven! it would ha' been better if she had died afore this!"

CHAPTER IV.

LUCKLESS ARTHUR WESTFALL.

It was during one of those financial panics which, like throes of agony, periodically convulse the country, that Arthur Westfall strayed into Kansas City. The day was drawing to a close, and the streets of that busy Western town were thronged with people, rushing hither and thither. A financial crash was pending, and the features of men were pale and haggard; there was despair and dread written on every face as they hurried by.

"Well, I don't see that anybody looks much happier than I," remarked Arthur, as he stood on the corner and gazed on the hurrying throng. Despite his miserable appearance, there was a reckless air about the young man. His face was pinched with hunger, his shoes covered with dust, his clothes well worn and travel-stained. Arthur had not tasted food for four-and-twenty hours. He had come from the rural districts, and long trudging on the road had not only made his feet sore, but fatigued his whole body. Yet there was a reckless humor about him as he halted on the street corner, with his earthly possessions, two shirts and three collars, tied up in a red handkerchief, in his hand. "This

is a curious world," he remarked, with a reckless laugh. "I have been twenty-four hours without food, slept in barns and haystacks, and yet I am as happy as some of these fellows who rush by in silk and broadcloth. There is philosophy in misery. So long as one is at the bottom, there is no dread of falling. It 's the fear of falling that makes these men so uncomfortable. It is the consciousness that I have reached the bottom that makes me contented, even if I am hungry."

This reckless young tramp, in whose eye there was a dangerous twinkle, three months before occupied a good position in Mark Hunt's dry-goods store, in a thrifty Missouri town. He was an orphan, His only relative was Mr. George Weatherby, an uncle on his mother's side, who had brought him up from infancy. Weatherby had no children of his own. He was a Virginian, and had emigrated, with his wife and sister's child, to Missouri at a period when Arthur was too young to remember it. Arthur was educated at his uncle's expense, and the old farmer, being in straitened circumstances, placed the youth in Mark Hunt's store to earn his own living. All went well for two or three years, when money was taken from the till, and circumstances at once fastened the crime on Arthur. He and Ab Nichols, a fellow-clerk, were the only persons having access to the till, and Ab quickly established his innocence.

Though there was no positive proof against Arthur, the suspicions against him were so strong that he was discharged. It was said he had lived a

rather gay life, and it was reported that he had spent his money before it was earned. At any rate, on the day of his discharge he had but a few dollars in his pocket. His good name was blighted, and he found the story of his crime travelling faster than he could. Wherever he applied for a situation, the story of the missing money was known, and his services were declined. His money was nearly gone, he was weary and heart-sick, when he went to his uncle's to stay a few days until he had recuperated his strength, but alas! he was soon to learn that the old house was no longer his home.

"No, Arthur, ye can't stop here," said his uncle, who, up to this time, had been his kindest benefactor. "Ye have disgraced me. I tried t' raise ye up in th' way ye should go, but ye departed therefrom; so go! I won't harbor a thief!"

"Surely, uncle," said the stupefied Arthur, "you do not believe that absurd story?"

"Why not? Th' proof 's agin ye."

"I know circumstances are against me, uncle, but I swear to you that I am innocent."

"Ye needn't do it, Arthur. Don't add perjury t' yer other crimes. All I ask is fur ye t' go so fur away I 'll never see nur hear o' ye agin."

Those cruel words sank so deep into the proud soul of Arthur that he answered:

"I will do it, Uncle George. Yes, I will never bother you again. Farewell!"

With a heart heavier than lead, he walked slowly down the grass-grown path to the gate which opened into the big road, hoping his uncle would

relent and call him back. But he did not, and Arthur again resumed his weary tramp in search of means to feed and clothe his body. He might have forgiven the cruelty of his uncle George, had he not found the suddenly-acquired hatred of that relative following him wherever he went.. George Weatherby seemed to take special pains to warn people against employing him, and in his desperate circumstances the young man parted with his worldly effects, one by one, until we find him in Kansas City without a penny in his pocket, tired and hungry.

"What is a fellow to do?" he thought, as he gazed up and down the street. "If I sit on a door-step a moment to rest, I am driven away. If I beg, they say: Why don't you work? If I ask for work, my past is inquired into, and I am told to go on."

He hungrily gazed into the show window of a baker's shop, where bread, cakes and pies were temptingly arranged. Might he not, like Jean Valjean, smash one of those windows, snatch a loaf of bread and hasten away? True, Jean Valjean paid the penalty by a life service in the galleys, but in prison he would be fed, and that was better than starving in the streets. He was about to put his plan into execution, when a little farther on a restaurant caught his eye, and a new plan suggested itself.

"No, I'll work the restaurant," he declared with a reckless laugh. "I will have at least one more good meal." With an improvised boldness foreign to his nature, but well assumed, he walked into the

restaurant, fragrant with food and jingling with dishes, while the waiters were hurrying from table to table, serving the hungry customers.

As coolly as if his pocket was filled with ready cash, the tramp walked leisurely in and seated himself by one of the small tables on the left, which he found unoccupied. A newspaper lay on the table, and he picked it up and glanced over the pages in a careless manner, which threw the waiters off their guard. When one of them came for his order, he gave it with coolness, taking care to select the best and most nutritious food.

"If I am to be kicked out, it shall be on a full stomach," he thought, while a grim smile played over his face.

He called for roast beef and turkey, bread, cheese and delicacies. The waiter laid down his ticket, and picked it up again half a dozen times, each time increasing its denomination. He ordered baked apple dumplings, dry sauce and peach cobbler, paying no attention to the increasing valuation of his ticket, although he reasoned that the kicks might be increased in proportion to its value.

When he had eaten all he could eat, and washed it down with a refreshing cup of coffee, he again picked up the paper and pretended to be very much interested. The waiter, with folded arms, stood waiting to clear away the table for some one else, and the cashier, whose counter was near the door, seemed growing impatient. Still he was in no hurry. He glanced at the ticket lying at his elbow

and saw that it called for one dollar and ninety-five cents. One hundred and ninety-five dollars would have been no more appalling to him at that moment.

He became interested in a cyclone story that was in the paper, read it through, then turned it over to see what was on the other side. It soon became apparent that the restaurant people were growing restless.

"It 's got to come some time," he thought, "and I had just as well go up and have it over with."

The front door was ajar, and he wished himself well out on the street. How ardently he wished there would be a fire, fight, sudden riot, or something to give him an excuse to rush out and make his way off. But everything was distressingly quiet, and he could not get it out of his head that the restaurant people were not watching to see that he did not make his escape. He took great interest in that paper, which, on examining the date of issue, was over a week old. He turned it over and over again, until he had well-nigh worn it out. At last he threw it down, yawned carelessly, and rising, put up his hand and took his dust-covered hat from the rack. He had paid no attention to the people who had been coming in and going out while he was eating. There were few in the dining-hall now, and he wished there were none, for he had not sunk so low as to be careless about others witnessing his degradation. He sauntered up to the cashier, took a wooden toothpick from the glass case, and in a careless, off-hand manner, said :

"I am ready."

"Ready?" asked the astounded cashier.

"Yes."

"Ready for what?" He was a large, burly fellow, with a heavy foot.

"To be kicked out."

"Are you a fool?"

"No. I have no money to pay you. I was starving and resorted to—"

"What! You rascal!" roared the angry man. Then giving vent to language highly tinctured with brimstone, he set forth Arthur in a manner calculated to lower the dignity of even a common tramp, and started around to "mop the floor" with him. Arthur had overestimated his strength. He supposed he could tamely submit to being kicked out; but wounded pride could not endure those words, if it might the kicks, so he began to square away at the cashier, when a tall, fine-looking stranger rose from one of the nearest tables, and coming on the scene calmly asked:

"What is the matter?"

"This dead-beat came into my restaurant, an' after eatin' enuff fur three men, won't pay me," exclaimed the enraged cashier.

"I can't pay; I have no money," explained the young man.

The tall stranger fixed his steel-blue eyes on the young man, and said:

"Don't be too harsh with him, sir; I read honesty in that young man's face. He may be in hard luck and actually suffering."

"But must I lose my dinner?" roared the infuriated cashier, showing more indications of belligerence.

"How much is the amount?"

"There is his ticket," cried the cashier, picking up Arthur's ticket and holding it before the stranger. "Just look at it. It 's a dollar and ninty-five cents, and I 'm not goin' to lose my money."

"Giving him a thrashing, which you may not be even able to do, will not get your money."

"No, but it 'll ease my conscience."

"Here is your pay," said the stranger, throwing down a two-dollar bill. "Give me the change."

The proprietor, somewhat mollified, turned to his money-drawer and handed him a nickel.

Standing near, humiliated and cowed, was Arthur Westfall. His pride was crushed. He knew that all eyes were on him, and that he was regarded either as an object of charity or a thief. The first was worse to him than the last.

"Now, young man, come with me," said the stranger who had settled his bill.

He followed him without hesitation, never even asking him where he was going, or for what purpose. There were no business engagements to consume his time, so he thought he could as well go with him as not.

It was dark when they emerged on the street. The tall man wore a broad-brimmed hat, which was inclined to slouch over his eyes. His dark-brown whiskers were neatly trimmed, and he had all the appearance of a business gentleman. His

clothes were neat and clean and his manner quiet, while the only nervousness observable was a continual restless movement of his eyes.

Arthur Westfall paid no attention to the course they took. He was only half conscious of dark alleys and low drinking dens, then of a narrow passage, a crowded stairway, and finally of being ushered into a small, dingy room, lighted by a solitary candle. The door was locked, and his companion, pointing to a plain stool-bottom chair, bade him be seated, while he settled himself in a half-reclining position on the bed.

"What is your name?" was his first question.

"Arthur Westfall, sir."

"I believe I have heard of you before," said the stranger. "You were in the employ of the merchant, Mr. Hunt—"

"Yes, sir. I see it all now. You are a detective, and have been shadowing me."

"You are mistaken; I am nothing of the sort."

"Then, perhaps, an officer. I will surrender, but as Heaven is my witness, I never took the money from the till."

"I have nothing to do with that," the stranger declared, his eyes nervously roving about the room. "It makes no difference whether you robbed Hunt or not, the world will have it you did."

"The world is wrong."

"No doubt. But one thing is certain, Arthur—you can never follow any peaceful calling."

"No, no!" he sighed. "Society has set its ban on me! I am ruined!"

He bowed his head in his hands, and a tear stole down his cheek. The stranger did not like this omen. Tears were not what he wanted. He waited a few moments for him to recover, then began pointing out the wrongs of society, showing him how often it happened that the guilty were most prosperous and the innocent suffered. He argued that as the worm turned and stung the foot that crushed it, so might man turn on society. He said there were men who had done so, whose names went down in history as heroes. Two conspicuous characters were Robin Hood and Rob Roy, whose praises were sounded by poet and historian until their names had become household words. They were only ordinary men, whom society in that day called outlaws. They had been wronged and struck back.

"I have my wrongs," continued the stranger, in a sad tone. "Society, for no other reason than that I was loyal to my convictions, set its seal of condemnation on me, so that I can no more live peacefully in the world than you. That you are innocent of the offense does not lighten the charge or the punishment. No, they will set the dogs of the law on your trail, and they will hound you to death, unless—"

He paused to see what effect his words were having. His hearer was deeply interested, and, taking hope, he went on to tell how he had suffered persecution until, unable to follow any honorable calling, he had been driven to offenses which the laws condemned. If one could not be permitted to

work for food and clothes, one must get food and clothes in some other way. In short, he wound up his harangue by saying he belonged to a band of choice spirits who rode excellent horses, had plenty of money and exciting adventures—a band of jolly, cavalier-like sort of free rovers, who sometimes levied toll on the road. Society had driven them to this, and society must take the consequences. He pictured the life in glowing colors, which to an adventurous spirit like Arthur's, and especially one in his desperate circumstances, was pleasing. There would be no more tramping, no more starvation or abuse, but money and good clothes in abundance. Would he unite his destiny with theirs and enjoy this plenty, or did he prefer starvation and curses?

"What is your name?" asked Arthur, calmly.

"Jackson—T. J. Jackson."

"Mr. Jackson, I am in desperate straits. The world, like the boasted charity of society itself, has turned its back on me. It seems I must follow your example or starve. In short, I am your man, and if this career brings me to the gallows, it cannot end a miserable existence too soon."

They held a long consultation in a lower tone, then went out together.

CHAPTER V.

MR. MEEKER REJECTED.

The quaint old Missouri town of Starkeville, which still retained some of its *ante-bellum* wealth and splendor, was suddenly roused from its usual midsummer lethargy by the announcement of a brilliant social event, which for weeks was the "town talk." This event was the Hawley ball.

Gen. Frederick Hawley, the rich banker, was one of the wealthiest and most influential citizens of Missouri. He had represented his State two terms in the national assembly, and was "strongly talked of" for governor; but having no political aspirations, be declined the honor, and devoted his time to his large and increasing business.

The eighteenth birthday of Grace Hawley, the only child of the General, came in midsummer, and that event was to be appropriately celebrated by a ball at the General's mansion.

Society in Starkeville had been on the tiptoe of expectation for weeks. The evening of the great Hawley ball, about which everybody had been in such a flutter, came. To a person passing the Hawley mansion at nine o'clock in the evening there appeared no indications of the unequaled

scene of grandeur and gayety which was to follow a few hours later, other than the long canopy which led from the curbstone up the white, pebbled walk to the vestibule doors. Not a window of the house was illuminated, nor had the lamps in the canopy been lighted to drive away the gloom. Everything was silent and as dark as though the mansion had been locked up for the night and its occupants all asleep.

Presently, however, a light appeared through a heavily-curtained window here and there, and as a colored servant in livery opened the vestibule to prepare the canopy lamps, a flood of light leaped out of the door, dispelling the idea that sleep had been thought of by the inhabitants within. As the hour grew late, there were indications of final preparations for the festivities which even the most ignorant of the passing pedestrians became convinced would ensue. Servants were running hither and thither, there was great bustle and excitement, and finally the director of the social event took his place on the curbstone to await the first carriage. He had not long to wait before it rolled up, and then guests began to arrive.

One might ask where so much grandeur and splendor had come from. The old Missouri town seemed at once transformed into a gay and fashionable metropolis. There were Congressmen, Senators, legislators, judges of courts, bankers, and wealth and beauty. Ladies, both young, middle-aged and old, pretty, common and homely, but all richly attired, with diamonds glistening at their

ears and throats, and with fleecy wraps thrown over their shoulders, tripped along the carpeted pavement, accompanied their escorts to the vestibule door.

After the guests had passed through the main hall, which was lined with palms and other growing plants, and had put aside the light wraps, they were ushered into the drawing-room, where they were received by General and Mrs. Hawley and their beautiful daughter, whose dark eyes far outshone any diamond or brilliant that night. Her costume, made for the occasion, was a marvelous combination of satin and brocade, made with a train, square neck, and trimmed with point lace. Her ornaments were diamonds, and consisted of necklace, with pendant earrings, bracelets and pins, while a tiara of the same gems was worn in the coiffure, holding in place a cluster of ostrich tips.

She was the queen of the evening. Her dark hair and eyes were brilliant; she was vivacious, piquant and charming.

"Isn't she pretty?"

"Oh, how lovely!"

Wealthy, beautiful and admired by all, how could Grace Hawley help being happy? She seemed to lack nothing that goes to make up human happiness. She was brilliant, merry, light-hearted, and with it all so gentle and kind that all who knew her loved her.

A young lady occupying the position of Miss Hawley could not lack for suitors. Some thought that a young Congressman was the favored one;

others said it was the Governor's son, while there was a whisper that her lover was a young lieutenant in the army. At any rate, Lieutenant Helm was present this evening. But those who knew the young lady best, declared she was engaged to Calvin Meeker, her father's cashier.

Mr. Meeker was twenty-seven years of age, a tall, handsome fellow, with steel-blue eyes and dark-brown beard, closely trimmed. He was an ambitious man, but was regarded by all who knew him as a careful, competent business man, honored and respected by all.

The drawing-room had been converted into a dancing-hall, and Lieutenant Helm, with the fair Grace, led in the german. Mr. Meeker, however, claimed the honor of her hand in the lancers. That the Lieutenant and Mr. Meeker regarded each other as rivals, none who saw them doubted. Meeker was persistent, and never lost an opportunity to whisper some pretty compliments in her ear.

Fred Darton and his affianced, Dora Hall, who were watching the trio, retired to a large bay window to discuss the probable chances of each.

"She likes the Lieutenant best," said Dora.

"No, the cashier is the man," returned Fred.

"How do you know, Fred?" Dora asked, giving her lover a sly glance from the corner of her large gray eyes.

"I have noticed her manner."

"Her manner? Why, you men know nothing about girls."

"Yes, we do. There is no girl who can conceal her preference. You may talk about art and deception as much as you will, but when a girl likes a fellow she is going to show it some way, you may depend on that."

"Now, you lords of creation imagine you know everything," said the fair Dora, with a pretty little pout, "but you don't."

"Well, Dora, we will not quarrel about it," returned Fred. "They are making up a cotillion; let us have a place in it." And Dora took his arm and they hurried away.

The truth was, Grace did not care a fig for any of her admirers, beyond personal friendship. Her heart had never been touched by a gentler emotion than a general liking for all acquaintances.

Mr. Calvin Meeker, with his tall form, his steel-blue eyes and dark brown beard, was an imposing personage, and one who might claim the admiration of any one. While he was not wealthy, his qualifications and position were enviable. He was the trusted friend and financial adviser of the General, was not known to have any vicious habits, and there were many more impossible things in the world than that he should win the hand of the banker's daughter.

But his manners, charming as he might be to others, lacked that quality of earnestness so essential to winning the heart of a sensible girl like Grace. We do not mean that he was not earnest in his devotion and desire to win her, yet to her clear common sense there was a mercenary motive back

of it all which surmounted any tender emotion he might entertain.

Any other girl would possibly have been deceived, but Grace Hawley was no ordinary person, and read people's hearts as the open pages of a book. In analyzing her suitors she said:

"There is Mr. Ravencroft"—the young Congressman; "he is too ambitious to make a good husband. I don't want a man who will devote his entire time to politics; besides, Mr. Ravencroft's political success has spoiled him. He is not the great statesman he imagines himself. The Governor's son," she continued, "dances well, rides well, is a gay companion and a society swell, but his head is too shallow to choose for a companion for life. Lieutenant Helm is good enough in his way, but not one to captivate me. I don't want a husband who has spent his life studying the science of killing and destroying; besides, who would want to spend her life cooped up in some barracks or frontier post? And as for Meeker, he is looking for a wife with millions. I would not suit him, nor he me."

On this occasion Mr. Meeker was more attentive than usual to Grace. He had lively competition, and was constantly at his wits' end to head off his three rivals, who were all on the ground.

At the close of a most entrancing waltz, and just as the last strains of the delicious music were dying away, he saw the Governor's son start toward his fair companion.

"You are fatigued, Miss Hawley," he whispered. "The room is oppressively close. Let me conduct

you to the conservatory, where you can rest and have fresh air."

"I am not tired; indeed I am not."

"You must be—come!" and he gently coerced her from the dancing hall. They were soon in the great conservatory, which was arrayed with almost oriental splendor. They were alone, and, having seated his fair companion, Mr. Meeker said:

"Miss Hawley, this has been the most enjoyable period of my life—"

"Mr. Meeker, will you please get my fan? It is so warm, and I believe I do feel a little faint."

"Certainly; let me bring you some refreshments—a glass of wine—"

"No, ice water will answer, thank you."

He hastened to obey. The fan was found in the dancing hall, and a negro servant came with a pitcher of ice water.

"That will do, Philip; you can go now," said Mr. Meeker to the servant, when Grace had sipped a cool, sparkling draught.

"The evening is very warm, Mr. Meeker."

"It has been so delightful that I scarcely noticed it."

"I have suffered little inconvenience myself, but I fear that some of my friends are dancing too much."

"Miss Hawley, I want to say something to you."

"Oh, excuse me, Mr. Meeker, I must really return to my guests."

"No, your mother can perform the duties of host-

ess for a few moments. Let me have a word or two with you."

She intuitively felt what was coming. She had known for some time that she must sooner or later submit to this ordeal; but, with natural human instinct, had put it off as long as possible. In an unguarded moment she had allowed herself to be lured into the conservatory, and now saw no safe retreat.

"Miss Hawley, what I have to say you must have conjectured long ere this—"

"Mr. Meeker, you really astonish me."

"Then pardon the abruptness of a plain business man. I love you, and ask you to become my wife."

She stared at him for a moment, while he fixed his steel-blue eyes on hers, and made an effort to take her hand. She gently withdrew it, saying:

"Pardon me, Mr. Meeker, if I have ever, by word or act, given you reason to hope that I looked on you in the light of a suitor. As my father's trusted companion in business, you could not be other than a friend, but, Mr. Meeker, I do not, cannot love you sufficiently to become your wife."

Mr. Meeker was stunned by this sudden rejection. He had played so long for this, had cut his cards and shaped them so nicely, that he felt certain; but now that Miss Hawley, the princely prize he had so long coveted and planned with such consummate skill to capture, coolly rejected his offer, he was stupefied. The very coolness of her manner was blighting to his hopes, for it told him she was in earnest.

"Miss Hawley—Grace—pray reconsider this matter. It is vital—"

"Mr. Meeker, it is unnecessary," she interrupted, with chilly firmness. "It is but justice to you to inform you at the beginning that, while I shall respect you as my father's friend, I can never love you sufficiently to be your wife."

"Let me implore you not to act hastily. Take time to consider. Oh, Heaven, give me some hope! I will wait any length of time if you will only give some ground for hope."

"That would be an injury to you, Mr. Meeker. I am no coquette, as you know, and have no pleasure in making others miserable. I can never be your wife, and to hold out even the faintest hope would be wicked."

She rose to return to the dancing hall, from which the sweetest strains of music were floating, but he passionately caught her hand a moment in his own, while his eyes flashed with a strange fire.

"Wait—wait just a moment, Grace. Pardon me if I seem rude, but it is hard thus to give up the light of my life, my hope and only joy. If what I ask seems foolish, unreasonable or impertinent, forgive me, and believe it is prompted by a heart that beats for you alone."

"Mr. Meeker, take your arm away."

He had tried to entwine his arm about her waist to stay her.

"Listen to me, won't you?"

"Yes, but at a distance. You forget yourself."

Abashed and humiliated, he muttered some apology and concluded with:

"Pardon me if I cling to any shadow of hope, and if I ask questions which, under any other circumstances, might be impertinent. Do you love another?"

"Though your question is highly improper, I have no hesitancy in answering. I love no man sufficiently to be his wife. I feel that I am scarcely more than a child, and am not ready to yield my liberties as a maiden for the fetters of matrimony. Excuse me, but I must return."

He conducted her back to the ball-room, with features carefully schooled to conceal the storm that was ranging within his breast. It was only when alone that he gave vent to his rage and disappointment.

"I have played too long for this to be foiled now," he declared. "Heavens! I must win her, or disgrace, ruin and perhaps the prison yawn for me."

CHAPTER VI.

LOVE AND PRISON BARS.

When Flora Wells regained consciousness, she was lying on her bed, in the room set apart for her in her uncle's house, and Aunt Rachel, with tears streaming down her cheeks, was bending over her, while at her side was the ever faithful Aggy, camphor bottle in hand. The face of the old negress was strangely comical in its grief. In the background were the pale yet calm Mrs. Howard and Uncle Reuben, both silent, grieved and thoughtful.

"Where is he?" asked the unfortunate girl, trying to sit up in bed.

"There, now, dear, don't!" said Aunt Rachel. "Here, lemme hold the camfire t' yer nose."

"No, no; let me have air. That makes me sick.'

"Open the window," suggested Mrs. Howard.

"Aggy, why don't ye raise th' winder? Rube, why d' ye stand there like a wooden man, when ye see th' pore child is dyin' fur lack o' air!"

Uncle Reuben started slowly toward the window. He did everything in a slow, methodical manner. Aggy started to do the same thing, but before either reached it, the ever thoughtful Mrs. Howard

sprang forward and threw it up, letting in the fresh air.

"Where is he? Take the camphor from my face, Aunt Rachel. Let me have fresh air. Where is he?"

Uncle Reuben and his wife exchanged glances, and Aunt Rachel took occasion to go below for a pitcher of fresh water. She beckoned her husband to come after her. Uncle Reuben was slow to comprehend, and still slower to act, but at last, after many winks and blinks, nods and motions, she got him to the hall.

"Rube, what shall we do?" she asked.

Uncle Reuben passed his fingers through his shaggy, iron-gray locks, and answered:

"I dun know."

"She will have to know it some time."

"Know what?" he asked.

"Know he was taken t' jail."

"Who was taken t' jail?"

"Oh, Rube, how stupid ye are! Didn't ye see the sheriff come an' arrest her feller down under th' hill by th' big stump where she fainted?"

Uncle Reuben, who had missed the interesting dramatic incident down by the "big stump," was greatly in the dark. He asked his wife what it was all about, and what it all meant, and what the big stump had to do with it.

"Aggy an' I were milkin' th' cows," she explained, "when we heerd a noise down by th' big stump, an' lookin' down there, saw this feller--"

"What feller?"

"Her feller, I guess. I don't know, only she

called him Horace. He rid up, got down, an' they were a-huggin' an' kissin', when up comes some men with guns an' arrested him fur bein' one o' th' robbers that robbed th' Standish bank. Said th' proof was dead ag'in him, as they had two witnesses as knowed him an' would swear he did it. She fainted, an' they took him away."

Uncle Reuben thoughtfully passed his fingers through his locks once more and said :

"Well, Rachel, I reckon ye better tell her all about it. She 's got t' know it some time. Might as well now as never."

" Now that's just what I say, Rube. She 's got t' know it, an' there hain't no use in keepin' it away from her."

Uncle Reuben grunted assent, and Aunt Rachel, who had forgotten her errand, went back into the room where Flora was sitting upright in the bed, asking Mrs. Howard :

" Where is he? What did they do with him?"

" I don't know, dear," that pale, patient lady answered. " I don't know to whom you refer."

" Horace—Horace Rathburne. I remember now they were going to shoot him. They called him a bank-robber."

" But they didn't hurt him, Flora. I saw it all," declared Aunt Rachel, coming into the apartment at this moment.

"Aunt Rachel, what does it all mean?" shrieked the unfortunate girl, flinging her arms about the good old woman and bursting into a fresh flood of grief.

"I don't know, child; I declare I don't know!" sobbed Aunt Rachel, pressing the poor child close to her breast. After a few moments Flora became more quiet, and, sitting in a chair, asked:

"Did they take him away?"

"Yes."

"Who were they?"

"Th' sheriff an' his men."

"Didn't they say he had helped rob the bank?"

"Yes."

"But, Aunt Rachel, it is false."

"I don't know, child!" sobbed the good woman.

"I do know. Oh, if you knew Horace, knew how noble, honorable, good and brave he is, you would know he is innocent!"

"Yes, yes, child; of course he is. It 's all a mistake—it 's all a mistake."

Uncle Reuben, who stood at the door, an interested spectator, beckoned his wife to come to him. She did, and he led the way down to their room.

"Rachel, tell me about it," he said. She told him all she knew and what she surmised, and Uncle Reuben quietly adjusted his glasses and, drawing his chair up to the table, on which was a lamp, pored over the columns of his paper for five minutes in silence. At last he folded the paper, laid it down, removed his glasses, and, fixing his eyes on his wife, said: "Rachel, I tell ye it 's so."

"What 's so, Rube?"

"That feller o' Flora's is a grand rascal, an' they 've got th' right man."

"How d' you know anything about it?"

"I 've just been readin' of it in th' paper. It says two men, Enoch Ralls an' Jack Auglin, knowed th' man whose disguise fell off in th' fight."

"Did they say 'twas Horace Rathburne?"

"Been fool t' said that afore they cotched him," returned Uncle Reuben. "No, didn't say who 'twas."

Aunt Rachel had to give it up. Her sympathies were with the unfortunate girl, and she tried hard to believe he was innocent for her sake. She stole quietly to her room. Flora sat weeping at the window.

"Poor child! D' ye want me t' come in?" she asked.

"Come in, Aunt Rachel, if you want to."

Aunt Rachel went in, and taking a seat at her side, placed her arm about her, and for a long time they sat in silence. At last the good woman asked:

"Do you want me t' send fur yer ma?"

"No."

"Nor yer pa?"

"Send for no one."

"Why?"

"My grief is such that parents cannot heal it. The love of mother and father would only be misery. They hate Horace, because I—I love him. They will say he is guilty, while I know he is innocent. Oh, Aunt Rachel, I am so unhappy!" and she buried her face in the bosom of the good woman and sobbed long and bitterly. Aunt Rachel mingled her tears with hers, and for a long time they sat in darkness and silence.

Uncle Reuben sat on the porch below, as he had sat for so many years, waiting for a return of custom to his tavern, which never came. He sighed, and was about to retire for the night, when he heard the sound of horses' feet coming from down the road. At first he thought he was dreaming, and started up to thrust his hand in his pocket for tobacco to light his pipe, when he saw a horseman ride up to the gate.

Wrapped in each other's embrace, Aunt Rachel and Flora were gazing out into the darkness, when the dark outlines of the horseman were seen. Flora started up, saying:

"There—there! They have killed him, and are coming to tell me!"

"No, dear, it is Mr. Howard."

Uncle Reuben rose and went to the gate.

"Good evening," said Mr. Howard, in his pleasant voice.

"Ye want yer hoss put up, don't ye?" asked Uncle Reuben.

"No. I can stay but a moment. I will tie him here, run up and see my wife and children, and then go."

"What! Ain't ye goin' t' stay all night?"

"I cannot," the strange man answered; and bounding up the stairs to his wife's room, he entered it and closed the door.

"Dat am mighty mysterious," muttered old Cater, shaking his head.

Uncle Reuben growled:

"Well, if he likes the saddle better 'n my beds, jist let him go, that's all."

Flora heard Mr. Howard enter the house and with a firm, light step hasten to his wife's room. She clung closer to Aunt Rachel and whispered:

"Maybe he has heard something of him. Let me go and ask."

"Wait, child. If he has, Missus Howard 'll tell us."

Mr. Howard remained with his wife for nearly half an hour. Then the two emerged from her room and walked to the gate.

"Thomas, can you tell me when you 'll come back?" she asked.

"No. I may drop in at any moment."

He untied his horse and walked down the road, she accompanying him a short distance. Cater, who had given the horse a close inspection, approached Uncle Reuben in a mysterious manner, and said:

"Golly, dat hoss hab been a-doin' a heap of hard trabellin' lately, lemme tell ye."

Uncle Reuben made no response, but quietly smoked his pipe, while Mrs. Howard and her husband strolled down the road, conversing in strange, hushed tones. It was an hour before the quiet little lady returned. She paused a moment at Flora's door to ask her how she "was feeling."

"Won't you come in, Mrs. Howard?" asked the girl.

"I will sit with you awhile if you wish it."

"I do."

"Let me look after the children first."

She went to her room and glanced at the chubby little children sleeping so peacefully, and carefully

tucking them in, kissed them and went to Flora's room.

"Mr. Howard made a short visit," said Flora.

"Yes. He was passing and thought he would call," returned Mrs. Howard.

"He is away very much."

"At times. Then, when business permits, he stays at home for months at a time."

"It must be a great comfort when he is home."

"Those are my happiest moments. They are the only moments when I am happy," she answered.

"Mrs. Howard, does he know anything of Horace, or why he was arrested?"

"He knew nothing until I told him."

"What does he think they will do with him?"

"My dear child, he knows nothing about it. He never heard of Horace before. But, as no one was killed in the robbery, the most they can do is to imprison him, unless—" she paused, gasped for breath, and bit her lip in anger for having uttered the last word.

"Unless what?"

"Unless the Vigilantes—"

"He is innocent, Mrs. Howard. I would stake my life on his innocence, but those terrible Vigilantes might not stop to inquire if he was guilty or innocent."

"Let us hope that no rash act will be committed. Tell me all about your lover. How long have you known him?"

"For three years; ever since he came to Missouri. My father used to think him his most valuable

salesman, until he asked his daughter's hand, and then he became enraged and drove him from the store."

"Have you heard from him since?"

"Once."

"Where was he then?"

"Wandering about seeking a location, and finding none. But his letters were full of hope and love."

"Cheer up, my dear, and try to hope for the best."

"Mrs. Howard, I must see him."

For several moments the quiet little lady sat gazing on the floor, and then, without elevating her eyes, asked:

"Would your father consent?"

"No; but I must see him, even if it is wrong. I must see him or die. Where will they take him?"

"To prison."

"But there are so many prisons. Every county has one of those horrible places. To which will he be taken?"

"I will ascertain."

"Will you do more?"

"What more?"

"Persuade Uncle Reuben to take me there."

After several moments she answered in the affirmative. Aunt Rachel, who had been below attending to some domestic duties, at this moment returned to the apartment of her niece. Flora placed her arms about her, kissed her wrinkled, faded cheek, and whispered:

"I want to go to him."

"Oh, dear child, ye skeer me," returned the good old lady.

She had lived in constant dread of this request ever since the lover had been taken away. She knew her own weakness, and was confident that she could not withstand the tears and entreaties of her niece; but with Uncle Reuben it was quite different. He was firm to stubbornness, and Aunt Rachel doubted in her own mind their ability to persuade him into even permitting Flora to go. He had been very prompt and emphatic in pronouncing Horace a "grand rascal," which was the hardest term Uncle Reuben was ever known to use.

Flora slept very little that night; and when morning came her pale, tearful face might have been seen looking out of the window, as if she was expecting some one. Aunt Rachel came to her room and said:

"Why, bless me, child, haven't ye slept none?"

"But little, Aunt Rachel. Where did they take him?"

"I dun know, but we 'll learn soon."

At breakfast Uncle Reuben was asked where the prisoner would probably be taken, and with his characteristic slowness expressed it as his opinion that he was in the Standish jail. Then began long, earnest persuasion to induce Uncle Reuben to go with her to see him. At first he flatly refused to either go himself or permit her to do so; but tears and entreaties prevailed, so that he consented for Cater to harness the horse to the old disused rock-

away and drive her to Rushville, where she could take the train for Standish.

"Will you go with me, Aunt Rachel?" she asked so pleadingly that the good woman could not refuse.

"I reckin I will hev to, child."

So, with Aunt Rachel at her side in the old rockaway, and Cater for coachman, they set off for Rushville. The rattle of loose bands and the clatter and groaning of old wheels filled one with apprehensions for the crazy old vehicle; but they reached the station in safety, and Aunt Rachel said:

"Now, Flo', dear child, git th' tickets, an' don't let that little upstart in blue coat an' brass buttons at th' winder cheat ye."

Flora assured her that they need have no fears of being swindled, and Aunt Rachel continued:

"I 've never been on them kears, an' I 'm a mite skittish about goin' on 'em."

Flora purchased the tickets, with Aunt Rachel standing by in great trepidation lest the train should "jump the track." When was the train due? In three hours. Was it on time? It was if it stayed on the track.

Aunt Rachel walked down to the end of the platform, where Cater sat in the front seat of the rockaway, and gave him his parting orders.

"Now d' you go home, Cater, an' help Aggy milk t'-night. Feed the ducks an' th' turkey I put in the coop that had its wing broke. Don't furgit th' pigs, an' tell Rube t' take keer o' th' place till I come back. I guess I 'll git back some time; this goin'

off t' Standish is like goin' t' th' other side o' th' world."

Cater sat holding the faded lines in his hands, muttering "Yes um!" at each particular order. At last she got through and started, but she called him back to see if he had forgotten anything she had told him. He remembered most of them, and she charged him anew, adding a few more duties, then dismissed him again; and he drove away as fast as he dared for fear she might think of something else to tell him.

Time was dull enough until the train came. Flora was engaged in preventing Aunt Rachel giving the agent a piece of her mind for his impertinence in saying he had already told her six times how far it was to Standish, and the train would make it in two hours. Aunt Rachel was very indignant, and wanted to know what depot agents were for if not to answer people's questions.

The train came at last, and they boarded it. Aunt Rachel declared she felt awful skittish, and wondered how that man "with the plug hat" could sit and read a newspaper when any minute he might be plunged down an embankment and killed. She held her ticket so tightly in her hand when the conductor came for it, and so obstinately refused to let him have it, that Flora asked why she did not give it to him. She answered that she had heard so much about them confidence men that she thought he might be one. Flora assured her it was all right, and she allowed the conductor to take the ticket.

"I reckin ye think I 'm a fool, don't ye, Flora?" she said. "Well, I hev traveled so little that I reckin I dun know how t' act."

They reached Standish by the middle of the afternoon, and upon inquiring, learned that Horace Rathburne was in the county jail.

"Let us go to the jail at once, Aunt Rachel," said Flora.

"But, child, ye ain't had no dinner, an' precious little breakfast; ye can't stand this."

"No, aunt; I can't taste food until I have seen Horace."

Aunt Rachel was silent. She was a woman and could appreciate Flora's anxiety. Verily, there is no height nor depth, breadth nor length to woman's love. It is boundless as space and durable as eternity.

Horace was sitting melancholy and alone in his cell when the dismal creaking of iron doors caused him to look up, and he saw the face of the jailer, who informed him some one wished to see him. He wondered who it could be. The jailer opened the door to his cell, and a light for mentered, seeming to bring a flood of sunshine with her.

"Horace!"

"Flora!" and the lovers were clasped in each other's arms.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. HOWARD AND OLD GEORGE WEATHERBY.

"Flora, why did you come?" the astonished prisoner asked.

"Horace, did you think I could stay away from you in such a trial as this?"

"But the prison—the disgrace—"

"What are they to me, Horace? You were here, you were alone, no one to speak a word of cheer or comfort to you, and I would be unworthy the name of woman had I abandoned you in this distress."

"Dear Flora!" he whispered, winding his arm about her and gently drawing her closer to him. "One can afford to be imprisoned, falsely accused and persecuted for such proof of love and constancy as this. Does your father know of this visit?"

"No. He would surely have forbidden my coming had he known I intended to do so."

"Have you braved his wrath to see me?"

"Horace, I may be wrong, yes, very wrong, but I could not live without seeing you. My parents would not let me. I love them. In all things save this I will be obedient to them, but God has given me a love stronger than theirs, and I must see you

or die. I must gaze into your eyes and read that innocence which no one else will believe."

He was silent several moments, for his emotions were beyond his control. At last he took her hand and said:

"Thank God, Flora, I can look you in the face and call Heaven to bear witness that I am innocent."

"Surely they cannot prove you guilty, and you will soon be given your liberty."

"Flora, be a brave little girl and prepare yourself for anything."

"Why, Horace, if you are innocent—"

"Many an innocent person has suffered for the guilt of others."

"But surely you—"

"I hope to prove myself innocent; but no one wants to believe it now."

"What proof have they against you?"

"Two men whom I know—and who, although their standing in society is not very high, will be believed—will swear they saw me on that day; that I remained in the street and held the horses of the men who robbed the bank; that, falling from my horse, my disguise was torn from my face."

"Who are those men?"

"Enoch Ralls and Jack Auglin."

"Did you ever offend them?"

"No."

"Then why do they maliciously prosecute you and swear falsely against you?"

"Those men think they are telling the truth."

"How can they?"

"It is simply a case of mistaken identity," he answered. "Many an innocent man has been hung or sent to prison from mistaken identity, and I may add one more victim."

"Oh, Horace, Horace!"

"Let us talk no more on that subject. Take heart and hope for the best. Let it end as it may, I am at peace with all the world, and, I trust, prepared to meet my God whenever He shall call me. I shall die happy in the glorious assurance and a full knowledge of your love and confidence in my innocence."

The parting was tender and affecting. He said he should hardly expect her to repeat her visit, for he knew her parents would object.

"Obey your father in all things," advised the prisoner. "He is good and kind to you. He does what he believes for the best; so wait, pray for the right and hope that all will soon be made right."

"Horace, can you not write to me occasionally?" she asked. "I will remain at Newburg."

"Yes, I will try; my letters will have to be submitted to the jailer for his inspection and approval."

She started, blushed for a moment, and then proudly said:

"Let him read them, and do not spare any word on that score. I care not if all the world knows what they contain."

They parted, and she, with Aunt Rachel, took the

night train for home. Aunt Rachel sat by the car window trying to pierce the darkness, and growing every moment more nervous as her imagination pictured some terrible barrier on the track.

"Flora, this consarned thing is runnin' into th' ground," she declared.

"No, aunt, it is all right."

"Isn't it off the track?"

"No."

She started at every extraordinary creak, vowing if she reached home safe she would never "resk her life ag'in in a railway kear." At last Rushville was reached shortly after midnight, and they took a room in the hotel. Aunt Rachel locked, bolted and barred the door and set a chair against it.

"I 've hearn so much about them city burglars that I shan't sleep a wink t'-night, I know," she declared.

The loud-tongued gong awoke her next morning, and she leaped out of bed, crying: "Fire! murder! help! thieves!" until Flora seized her arm and assured her that it was only the gong to waken them for breakfast.

"Oh, I 'm a fool, I reckin," declared Aunt Rachel. "I keep tavern myself and orter know somethin', but times an' things ain't now as they used t' be. They 've got so many new-fangled notions that I feel ez if I had been dead an' buried, like Rip Van Winkle, what yer uncle used t' read about."

Shortly after breakfast old Cater came with the ancient vehicle and took them back to the gloomy,

silent old tavern, with Uncle Reuben sitting as usual on the porch, waiting for the return of a once prosperous business.

Mrs. Howard was in her room, quiet as usual. She did not mention the subject of Flora's visit until the next day, when she asked:

"Did you see him?"

"Yes."

"I hope you found him cheerful?"

"How can he be when some strange circumstances seem to be weaving about him a net from which there is so little hope of escape? Two men swear they recognized him."

"Maybe they are mistaken."

"They *are* mistaken; but I fear a jury will believe them."

Mrs. Howard changed the subject, and shortly after went to her room aud locked herself up with her children. That night Mr. Howard came, and Cater put his horse in the barn. He remained until the middle of the next day, spending nearly all the time in his wife's apartment.

"Dat man am gittin' mighty mysterious," declared old Cater to Uncle Reuben. "Why, I decla' he jis come an' go like a ghost. No 'n know wha' he cometh nur wha' he goeth."

"'Tain't none o' our business," answered Uncle Reuben, gazing after the solitary horseman disappearing over the hill.

Mr. Howard was more thoughtful than usual that bright, sunny afternoon, as his great black steed jogged slowly over the road. His head was bowed,

and one might have thought him a clergyman conning o'er his next day's sermon. But anon he sat up erect in his saddle, chirruped to his horse, and the spirited animal galloped on mile after mile without seeming the least fatigued.

The day had been sultry, and toward evening the western skies became overcast, and there was every indication of a storm. Mr. Howard had passed two or three villages, and was pressing on as if he had some certain goal to reach before dark. Those lowering clouds in the west and the occasional rumbling of thunder caused some apprehension on his part, and he quickened his pace.

"The prospect of passing the night in such a storm as we are going to have, without shelter, is not pleasing," he thought.

He seemed to have wandered into a portion of the country thinly inhabited. He had for hours been riding through hills, breaks and forests, with scarcely a sign of human civilization save the beaten road. But just as the darkness began to deepen into night, and the storm which had been so long threatening seemed ready to burst in all its fury upon him, a farmhonse loomed up on the hill, and galloping to the gate, he threw himself from the saddle and called the farmer to his aid.

"What d' ye want?" asked a man about fifty years of age, with shaggy whiskers and sandy hair streaked with silver. His face was not a pleasant one, for toil and exposure had deepened the lines which avarice had started into wrinkles.

"It's going to storm," replied Mr, Howard, "and I beg the hospitality of your roof for the night."

"Wall, stranger, we don't keep tavern, but I reckin we can't turn ye away when it 's goin' to rain like blue blazes. Bring yer hoss around t' th' barn an' let 's put him up."

Mr. Howard led his tired horse through the big gate into the barn lot, to the barn, where he quickly removed the saddle and bridle. The animal was soon carefully rubbed down, and eating his corn, oats and hay in his stall, while Mr. Howard and the farmer went to the house just in time to escape the first fury of the storm.

"What 's yer name, stranger?" asked the farmer.

"Thomas Howard."

"Air ye a cattle buyer?"

"No, I am not buying stock at present, but looking out for a location for a large cattle ranch. I want to buy a thousand acres in a body."

"Massy sakes, that's a heap o' land!"

"Yes, but I expect to have the assistance of men with money, and we will raise cattle by the thousands. I beg pardon, sir, but I believe I do not know your name."

"Weatherby is my name—George Weatherby. Guess you hev hearn it afore."

"I don't know that I have," remarked Mr. Howard, coolly.

"Why, I thought everybody in the hull country knowed how I wus disgraced."

"Disgraced?"

"Yes, by my nephew. Hain't ye hearn tell on et?"

Mr. Howard gave him a look of astonishment and answered:

"I never heard of you or your nephew before. What do you mean?"

"I never like t' talk about family matters, but I reckin I mought ez well tell ye, now that I've got yer curiosity raised. I came from Virginia here t' Missouri and brung my sister's child, Arthur Westfall, both o' his parents bein' dead. He warn't nuthin' but a baby then, an' we raised him ez tenderly ez we could, an' my ole woman sot a great store by him. He growed up t' be a young man, an' we had him eddicated, an' he went t' clerk in Mark Hunt's store. Thar he got t' livin' fast, an' t' keep up that kind uv a life stole from th' money-drawer."

"Was he convicted?"

"No. Mark, fur my sake, wouldn't push him, ye know."

"Where is he now?"

"Dun know. Mark discharged him, an' he kim back home t' stay, cos he couldn't find any other place, an' I driv him off."

"Have you never seen nor heard from him since?" asked Mr. Howard.

"No."

"Have you made any inquiry?"

"No.'

"Mr. Weatherby, your nephew may be innocent."

"No, he ain't. I tell ye he ain't. No 'n' but him an' Ab Nichols knowed whar th' money wuz, an'

Ab proved an allerby—that he warn't thar when it wuz done."

"Don't you think you were rather harsh with your dead sister's child?" asked Mr. Howard, coolly.

"Why?"

"Even if he was guilty, he is but a young man, scarcely more than a boy, and perhaps this was his first offense."

The wrath of the farmer flamed out in gusts, and he sprang to his feet, and, striding up and down the floor, cried:

"No, no; ye don't understand it at all. He is lost. He disgraced me an' my wife. Th' beggar never had a dollar in his life except what I gave him. Becky an' me starved ourselves and went in rags t' git him through school. Yes, we went cold and hungry fur him. We give him th' best part o' our lives, an' he disgraced us. No, he don't deserve anybody's sympathy."

Mr. Howard sat gazing in silence into the dark, wide-mouthed fireplace. His features were as immovable as if they had been carved out of stone. Mr. Howard was a remarkable man in more ways than one, but his most remarkable characteristic was the concealment of his emotions. Those who remember him (no one ever knew him) could tell nothing of the thoughts that stirred his breast. He might be in full sympathy or utterly detest one, but his features were the same—plain, pleasant, expressionless and immovable.

"Come out to supper!" called the wife.

They rose, left the sitting-room, and went into the kitchen, which also served for dining-room, where the farmer's silent wife had spread the board for the evening meal. They seated themselves, and without ceremony fell to eating in silence.

The nephew was not referred to again, though he was in Mr. Howard's mind long after he lay on his couch, listening to the patter of the rain on the roof of the old farmhouse.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. MEEKER SCHEMES.

No one to have seen Mr. Meeker in his place of business next day would have dreamed that the fondest hope of his life had just been blighted. He was smiling, cheerful and brisk, as if Grace Hawley had consented to become his wife, instead of having flatly refused him. Mr. Meeker possessed the art of dissembling to a remarkable degree, and while there might be a "mounting devil" at his heart, his exterior was as calm and peaceful as a summer's morning.

Late hours and dissipation made no difference to

him, and he was bright, smiling and cheerful, though he had scarcely slept two hours the night before. Mr. James Odin, the bookkeeper, was the only person in the bank when he arrived.

"Mr. Meeker," said Mr. Odin, in a faltering tone.

"Well, James, what is it?"

"I want to call your attention again to some entries in the books—"

"No, no, not now! I am busy, James."

"But, Mr. Meeker, this cannot be let run much longer."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I will have to post up the books, show the deficit, and call the attention of the directors to it."

"Hold on, James! For Heaven's sake, don't ruin me!"

"Then, Mr. Meeker, you must explain this."

Mr. Meeker's face, usually smiling and happy, had grown considerably paler. He walked to the door, which was still closed, for the hour was early and the bank not open for business. Returning to the bookkeeper, whose face wore a puzzled and confused look, he asked:

"James, did I not get this position for you?"

"Yes; but—"

"Do you really want to ruin me?"

"No; but if I go on keeping crooked books and making false entries, I am liable to land myself in the penitentiary. I tell you there is a shortage of several thousand dollars, and your last trip to Chicago increased it some fifteen hundred more."

"Don't say anything about it. I can replace it soon."

"Mr. Meeker, you have said that so often that I have really begun to doubt your ability to do as you promise. True, it was through your kindness I got this place, for which I am very grateful. But if you think I am going to cover up your losses in speculations in the Board of Trade and Stock Exchange, you are mistaken. My liberty is worth too much to me for that."

Meeker shrugged his shoulders.

"This is cursed luck!" he thought. "If the General's daughter would marry me, the old man would do nothing; but as it is, with confidence betrayed, I know he would jail me." Turning quickly on the bookkeeper, who he knew would not much longer cover up his defalcation, he said: "Look here, James—Mr. Odin, I mean. This can all be fixed. I tell you you are in no danger. The State funds are to be deposited here."

"How will that account for a shortage of nearly seven thousand—"

"Oh, I have the money."

"Then deposit it."

"I can't do it now."

"I cannot much longer delay my report, and when it is made it will be truthful."

"No, no, no. I tell you it is all right."

"If it is all right, why do you object to my making my report?"

"I don't—I don't. But wait and give me a chance."

The bookkeeper turned away with a distrustful

expression on his face and resumed work at his desk. Meeker knew the fellow had him in his power. Though James Odin was under obligations to Meeker, it was quite evident that the cashier could not make a tool of him. Odin was actuated partially by a sense of honor and partially by fear of the consequences. Should he aid the cashier to cover up the shortage by making false entries, he knew he would be *particeps criminis*, and probably occupy the adjoining cell to him in prison. Mr. Odin had determined that, come what might, he would keep his skirts clear.

"I am poor and have little influence," he thought, "and if there is any way of saddling this offense on me, it will certainly be done. No, I must guard against it; I will guard against it, and no crookedness shall be laid at my door."

It would be difficult to make the directors believe their trusted cashier had defaulted. Mr. Meeker had impressed that fact on his mind again and again.

"Something has got to be done," Meeker thought, as he took his place at his desk, after having secured a postponement of the report for a few days. "Why, I am in a devil of a fix. If there was any possibility of winning that girl, I could go on and be sure I was safe; but there is a little particle of hope. She loves no one else, though, and that is a point in my favor, and I shall not give her up."

Strange, dark plots were evolving from the brain of the cashier as he leaned his head on his hand.

"Mr. Meeker, the hour for opening has arrived," said a clerk.

"Unlock the door."

It was a busy day at the Hawley bank, and clerks, paying teller, cashier and all were busy until the closing hour. Odin and Meeker were the last to leave the building. All day long the cashier's mind had been busy with a desperate plan, and when he and the bookkeeper were alone, he said:

"I want a word with you, Odin."

"Well?"

"Would you accept a situation in an Iowa bank if it was offered you and you could get away from here honorably?"

"Yes," said Odin. Although he felt certain that Meeker was doing something wrong, he had no inclination to be a party to his conviction. "But my books shall be straight to the hour of my leaving."

"That will be all right. I must get another bookkeeper--one who is not quite so nervous."

"I hope you do not intend doing any wrong?"

"Why, no, of course not. I value my position in the world too much for that. Now here I have it," he said, taking a letter from his pocket. "The cashier of Logan's Bank, in a good Iowa town, has written me to know if I can recommend a competent bookkeeper, and I will recommend you at once."

"How soon will that take me away?"

"Before it will be necessary to make your monthly report. Will you take the place?"

"The salary?"

"The same, but the climate is more congenial to your health," and a strange, dangerous smile played over Meeker's face.

"Yes, I will do it. But my expenses there?"

"I will get you a pass."

"Say I will take it."

"I will telegraph your answer in five minutes."

"And the new bookkeeper?"

"We will get along some way."

He left the bank, to return almost immediately and caution Odin to keep mum on the subject.

"It might cause some awkward explanations for both of us," he said. "We would both be held equally guilty."

"I will only say what I am compelled to say," Odin answered. "I shall leave the books for the new man to balance; you can deal with him as you will."

"Yes, yes, I know; but you will be safe in Iowa, and need not fear any inquiry into your acts. So good day. You can go home and pack your trunks, for you will be telegraphed to come next train."

Mr. Meeker went to his hotel, for, being a single man, he lived at a hotel. He wrote a note to a dissolute fellow named Bob Maddox, and sent it to him by a messenger boy.

"You will find him at Conroy's saloon," he said to the messenger. It was early in the evening, and Maddox had not yet time to get drunk, when the boy entered the saloon.

"Are you Bob Maddox?" he asked.

"Yes; whatcher want with me?" growled Bob huskily.

"Here is a note for you," and he handed him the note from Meeker. Bob took it and read:

"BOB MADDOX: Will you meet me at the old mill below town to-night, at eleven? Answer on this. I will pay you for coming, even if we don't make a trade. C. MEEKER."

Bob, who had nothing to engage his attention in particular on that night, took a pencil and wrote in a broad, scrawling hand across the face of the paper: "*Yes!*" and giving the note to the messenger, said:

"Take it back ter him."

When Meeker received the answer, he tore up the paper, and, burning the scraps, said:

"Now to play a bold scheme! It 's a unique one—one that has never been attempted in fiction or reality. If it succeeds, I am saved, and, who knows, she may be glad to be my wife yet."

Calvin Meeker loved Grace Hawley in his way. Her cool rejection of him was humiliating to his pride, and he determined to crush her spirit as well as save himself.

"I can do both if my cards are played right. I will sound Bob Maddox to the bottom, and give him to understand if he obeys it is wealth, if he betrays me it is death."

The hour for the meeting came, and Mr. Meeker donned his silk hat, took his cane, and without any effort to disguise himself or keep his visit a secret, walked down to the old mill which stood in the outskirts of the town on the river bank. The moon

shone brightly from a cloudless sky, and the path to the mill could be easily followed, though it led through a grove of oaks. He entered the office, went to the secretary and lighted a lamp. The mill had been idle for three months. It was in the hands of a receiver, and Meeker was the receiver.

He sat at his desk a moment looking over some papers, when there came a shambling step, and Bob Maddox entered.

"Hello, Bob! Are you duly sober?" he asked.

"Yes," in a hoarse voice.

"Sit down," and he pushed a chair toward him.

Bob seated himself, and Mr. Meeker rose and carefully closed the door, saw that the blinds were securely fastened, and, returning to the desk, said:

"Bob, I want to talk with you on a curious business. Do you want to make a few thousand dollars right easily?"

"Do I?" leering at his interlocutor. "Do a thirsty duck wanter swim?"

"Now wait a moment. You served in the late war, did you not?"

"You bet!"

"Were you with Quantrell, Anderson and Todd, the great Missouri guerrillas?"

"Yes; but they are all dead now."

"I know those leaders are dead, but there are many of the old guard living, and I have heard it said they stick together through thick and thin."

"Wall, whut ef we do?"

"That is just what I want you to do, Bob. Now I know how some of your friends could make a

pile of money, and you could get a good share of it yourself."

Bob fixed his bleared eyes on the speaker a long time in silence, and then said:

"See here; ef yer tryin' t' git my neck in a noose, yer blame badly mistaken."

"I don't ask you to do anything that endangers your life or liberty."

"Whut d' ye want?"

For answer, Mr. Meeker took a pencil and wrote a name on a slip of paper, and handing it to him, said:

"I want to talk with that man."

"Whut? D' ye think I 'd turn spy?"

"No, I am not so foolish as to attempt his capture. I want to talk with him on business."

They conversed a long time in whispers. Bob became more earnest, and at last said:

"I 'll see 'f it kin be done, but doubt it."

"Do it, and the money is yours."

CHAPTER IX.

THE IMPRISONED LOVER AND THE OUTRAGED PARENT.

In his narrow, dark cell, Horace Rathburne was leading a miserable existence. His sudden arrest had been such a surprise that it stunned him, and at first he could hardly persuade himself it was not some horrible dream. He tried to argue with himself that he had been guilty of no crime and had nothing to fear, but his memory with tantalizing vividness recalled stories of innocent men suffering for the guilty. He passed through all the degrees of misfortune a prisoner at his first incarceration in a dungeon must suffer. He commenced with pride, a natural consequence of hope, and a consciousness of innocence, which justified in some measure the action of the sheriff and his deputies. He had to admit there were some suspicious circumstances connected with his conduct, and he was at times in such a state of mind as to almost believe he might, in a delirium of which he was now unconscious, have perpetrated the robbery.

He entreated to be removed from his present dungeon to another; for a change, however disad-

vantageous, was still a change, and would afford him some diversion. He entreated to be allowed to walk about, to have books and instruments. Nothing was granted; no matter, he asked all the same. He was a bank robber, one of a class who had become the dread of Missouri, and the most harmless musical instrument might become a terrible weapon in his hands. He accustomed himself to speak to his jailer, although that person grew more and more taciturn every day.

One night, shortly after his imprisonment, he heard the noise of a great crowd of people without, from which angry voices went up on every side. There was only a low, sullen, rumbling sound at first, which gradually came nearer and nearer, until it burst like a resistless storm all about the jail, seeming to shake the prison to its very foundation-stone. He felt no apprehension at first, but anon from out the angry roar of voices there came intelligible words:

"Hang him! String him up! Curse him—he robbed our bank; let us hang him up an' be done with it!"

"Oh, Heaven, it is coming!" he thought, and fell on his knees in the corner of his cell, like a poor hunted rat.

He had not thought of death before, but now it came on him with all its terrors, and he actually quaked with fear. He had heard of lynchers, had read of their terribly bloody deeds, but had scarcely ever given them a passing thought. Now they rose before him in all their hideousness, and in a light

he had never imagined before. To die, and by the hangman! Who can endure the thought without time to steel his nerves for the ordeal? But to be torn from prison without time for a moment's preparation, a rough, cruel rope fastened about his neck, and dragged to a tree or lamp-post and hanged until one was dead, completely overpowered him. In his imagination he saw his poor mutilated body dragged through the street. Oh, Heaven! what was he to do? He who had never wronged one by word or thought, was now to suffer such a fate.

Don't think Horace a coward. He could face death with coolness when prepared for it; but this was so sudden, so disgraceful, so awful, that it seemed to freeze his blood. The uproar about the jail became greater every moment, until he thought they must burst in the walls of the prison.

"Say, pardner," called a gruff voice from another cell, "I reckin ye hear that noise out thar? It 's you they 're arter. Farewell, mate. I hope ye 'll meet it like a man."

That criminal taught him a lesson of courage. After a short prayer to God, he rose and seated himself on the vermin-infested bunk, determined to meet his fate with the courage and resignation of a hero.

Then above the uproar without came the clear, ringing tones of some one appealing to the angry mob for reason and law. He asked God to bless the speaker, and though he never learned his name, he never ceased to pray for him since. He was a brave man, for he stood in defiance of the mob and

swore the prisoner should not be harmed. For a long time it seemed doubtful if he would prevail. That single manly voice was drowned amid the roar of hundreds of angry men. But at last the uproar began to subside; and then the voice of reason and humanity could be heard in mild appeal, asking them to retire and let the law take its course.

Slowly and sullenly the mob retired, ashamed and yet angry. When the mob had gone, the man in the adjoining cell called out: "Say, pardner, yer safe now. They don't hardly ever try it a second time. Ye kin thank th' feller that made th' speech fur savin' yer bacon."

Horace made no answer, but threw himself on his couch and tried to sleep. Days passed, and then came the visit of Flora, as already recorded. He took care to keep from her ears the story of the attempted lynching. All the pious idea that had been so long forgotten returned; he recollected the prayers his mother had taught him, and discovered a new meaning in every word. In prosperity prayers seem but an assemblage of words, but when the day of misfortune comes, the language by which the unhappy sufferer invokes the pity of Heaven becomes sublime. He prayed, and prayed aloud, no longer terrified at the sound of his own voice; for he fell into a species of ecstasy. He laid every action of his life before the Almighty, proposed so many tasks to accomplish, and at the end of every prayer introduced the entreaty oftener addressed to man than God, "Forgive us our tres-

passes as we forgive them that trespass against us."

"The hypocrite!" sneeringly declared the jailer when he once heard him at prayer.

Three or four days after Flora's visit, he had risen from his devotions and was sitting in his dark cell, gloomy and despondent, when the sound of voices reached his ears, and a few moments later the jailer entered and said:

"Rathburne, here 's a visitor to see ye."

"I wonder who else can want to see me?" he thought.

A moment later he was staring in amazement at a man past fifty years of age, who had just been ushered into his cell, and who stood winking and blinking in the unaccustomed darkness. His face was smooth-shaven and not unpleasant, though marked with firmness. At sight of him Horace started back, saying:

"Mr. Wells!"

"Horace, Horace," said the merchant, grasping the hand of his former employee, "believe me, I am sorry to see you here."

"Mr. Wells, I swear I am innocent."

"No, no, don't try to come that over me, my boy; for I have talked with the witnesses, and their word can't be questioned."

"Mr. Wells, I swear—"

"No, don't swear at all."

"Won't you believe me?"

"Not in this."

Horace dropped down upon the couch, put his

hand over his face and for a moment could scarcely repress the groan of agony that rose to his throat. After a few moments he lifted his head, and said:

"Mr. Wells, I was three years in your employ."

"So you were."

"In all that time, did you ever have cause to doubt my word?"

"Ahem! But—but you see this entirely alters the case."

"Was I not always honest with you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Did I not have abundance of opportunities to rob you if I had so desired?"

"I admit all you say, Horace; but things have changed. I don't say you are wholly without excuse."

"Mr. Wells, you surely do not understand me."

"I understand you thoroughly," declared the merchant, drawing a stool near the bunk on which the prisoner sat. "There are many sentimental people who would try to justify you, but I don't. I understand all. While you were with me you were sober, honest and reliable. I liked you, Horace; I liked you well; and lost no opportunity to show you that I did. But you abused my trust in you. You infatuated my only child, Flora, who was a young and susceptible girl—"

"Pardon me, Mr. Wells, but I really love your daughter."

"If you did you should have remembered your standing!" cried the merchant, angrily. "But you did not, and she had to suffer. I sent her away to

a quiet place where you could not find her, and discharged you, hoping you would leave the State; but you did not do it."

"No; I could not, Mr. Wells. I could not leave Flora."

"Nonsense! Listen. If you loved her so, why were you seen at Muldoon's saloon two evenings after you were discharged?"

"A man to whom I had loaned a small sum of money was in there, and I went in to try to get it."

"Yes, but I 'll warrant you imbibed freely before you left."

"Why, Mr. Wells, you know I never—"

"Not while with me; but when discharged no doubt you thought you would go and drown your trouble in a glass; and then you began to drift. We lost sight of you. You were angry at being discharged; filled with disappointment at not gaining the hand of a rich bride whom you thought you had won, and went on growing every day more reckless. At last you met those desperadoes, whoever they were, and planned this robbery."

"Mr. Wells, as Heaven is my witness, you wrong me."

"Hold, don't interrupt me," went on the merchant, raising his hand, and by his very manner commanding silence. "I don't say that any other young man might not have done the same. We never know what men in their desperation may or may not do, until they are tried; but when the deed is once done it cannot be condoned. You ought to feel thankful that no lives were lost in

that affair, for then yours would have been the forfeit."

"Mr. Wells, you go on the presumption that I am guilty."

"Of course, of course! Why will you deny it? I would think much more of you if you would boldly face it, admit the truth and plead penitence, than to try to cover it up with a plea of innocence."

"I cannot admit what I never did."

"Hush, Horace. I have talked with two of the witnesses who saw you when the bank was robbed. I know those men, and know they are not lying about it. Why should they? They have no wish to injure you. They may be poor and lazy, but there is not a man living that will say that either Ralls or Auglin would perjure himself. But, Horace, I feel sorry for you. You are poor, naturally you are honest, and I don't want to see you punished. You served me faithfully while in my employ, and really I have a warm place in my heart for you."

He ceased speaking, and Horace, with bowed head, maintained silence.

"What have you to say for yourself? Why don't you say something?"

"Why should I say anything? You will not believe me."

"Horace, you shock me by insisting on your innocence, which I know cannot be true. I pity you more than I blame you. I want to do what is best for you if you will let me." Then lowering his

voice so that no one save the inmate of the cell might hear him, he added: "There are but two men who really recognized you. You can be convicted only by their evidence. I can send them off on some business that will detain them until after the Grand Jury, and you will be discharged for lack of evidence. I will do it if you will leave Missouri and never return or correspond with any one in the State."

He gazed at the speaker for several minutes in amazement, then answered:

"Mr. Wells, I am innocent, and I will not leave the State. No, do not send any witness away on my account. I will face my accusers."

"What! Are you a fool?"

"I may be a fool, but I never committed that crime."

"Innocent or guilty, you will be convicted."

"I would rather be convicted an innocent man than slink away like a thief afraid of justice. I ask the aid of no technical advantage of law; it is not justice that I fear."

"Young man, you will change your tune," cried Mr. Wells, angrily, and placing his hat on his head, he left the prison.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. HOWARD'S SYMPATHY.

Flora Wells was for a long time kept in ignorance of her father's visit to her lover. She languished at the old house of Uncle Reuben, with no desire to leave. It was so quiet, so isolated from all the world, that it seemed just the place for the grief-stricken to come to mourn, or the abashed to hide their heads. She dared not face her friends or relatives, and her father she intuitively knew was Horace's worst enemy.

In her soberest moments she shuddered at the reasonableness of his guilt. Why should Ralls and Auglin testify falsely against him? They could have no possible motive in doing so. Then could he possibly account for their being mistaken? She often sat in her room long after every one in the house was buried in slumber trying to discover evidence—unquestionable evidence of his innocence.

One night she sat by her window later than usual, gazing at the far-off stars, and asking herself if God was just in all his dealings with mankind, when she heard the tramp of a horse's feet coming down the road. Her room was dark, for she had

long since extinguished the lamp. She gazed down upon the star-lit road and saw a horseman ride leisurely to the front of the house, halt, dismount, tie his horse, and, picking up a pebble, toss it against Mrs. Howard's window. As he did so, his face was turned directly toward the house, and she recognized him as Mr. Howard. Leaning from the window, she said:

"If you wish to see Mrs. Howard, I will call her."

"Excuse me, Miss Wells; I wanted to speak with my wife without disturbing you."

"I am coming, Thomas."

A moment later the faithful wife came down and went softly out to her husband, who was standing by his steed at the gate.

"Can't you come in and wait until morning?" she asked.

"No, no, I must go in a few moments."

They strolled over the hill to an old, deserted house, and she could see no more of them. Mrs. Howard was gone about half an hour, when she came back, and shortly after she had entered her room a pair of horsemen rode past the house in the direction the mysterious Mr. Howard had gone. She afterward remembered that she had asked herself if they could have anything to do with Mr. Howard. Next day she and Mrs. Howard took their accustomed stroll down the forest path.

"I pity you, Flora, I pity you from the bottom of my heart," declared Mrs. Howard.

"Thank you, Mrs. Howard, I know what you say comes from the heart."

"We all have our griefs and cares," continued Mrs. Howard. "We all have our secrets, too, which we keep from all but God."

"I have no secrets, Mrs. Howard. I love Horace, and am not ashamed of it. He is manly, noble and grand, and now that he is falsely accused I will not desert him. Heaven forbid I should ever desert any one in distress, least of all him. He is innocent! He is innocent!"

As they walked slowly down the path, the wife of the mysterious man kept her eyes on the ground. She was very thoughtful. The birds flitted about from tree to tree, and the timid hare scampered away to the deeper shades filled with the odor of last year's leaves moistened by rains and half decayed. At last Mrs. Howard raised her head and said:

"Would you not love him just the same if he was guilty?"

"He is not guilty, Mrs. Howard."

"But even if he was, would you not still love him?"

"How could I help it?"

"You could not, dear child. The heart is beyond our control. When once we love, like Paolo and Francesca, we must follow that love even to perdition."

Flora paused and looked aghast in the face of the speaker. She was half frightened at her terrible earnestness. Seeing she had startled her young companion, Mrs. Howard entwined her arms about her and said:

"Flora, you are young; you know not to what heights and depths we may go for those we love. Charity covers a multitude of sins, but love hides all. Oh, my dear Flora, you believe your lover is innocent. So do I, for your sake. God grant we may not be mistaken; but if love is deeply seated in your heart, you could forgive even if he were guilty. There are so many circumstances surrounding crime. One may be driven to it; one may be forced by a hundred different circumstances into crime. Few criminals are so from choice; necessity, wrongs, and a thousand other things which the world never knows, drive men to desperate deeds."

"He is innocent."

"Child, I love you for saying that," whispered Mrs. Howard. "I like you to believe he must be innocent. Yet if he was not, would he be wholly blameless? He was discharged — thrown out of employment for something over which he had no control. How could he help loving you?" And as Mrs. Howard gazed on that beautiful face she thought no one could help doing that. "You were both young, beautiful and gifted, and because he loved and was loved in return he was discharged and pursued by persecution. There are many men who by dishonest means suddenly acquire a fortune. Perhaps he thought if he could suddenly become rich he might then win his heart's idol, as poverty was the only barrier between him and you."

"But he is innocent," she interposed.

"Of course he is. But if he was not, surely you must still love him. He might have fallen at the very moment when his heart was most rebellious into the hands of the banditti, who, knowing his wrongs and temptations, persuaded him to at one stroke make a fortune and win the girl he loved."

Flora turned her soft, blue eyes, now welling over with tears, upon her companion, and repeated the sentence in the same trust and confidence :

"He is innocent."

"Heaven bless you, Flora! He is innocent! He must be innocent!"

Flora fell sobbing on her companion's breast, and cried :

"What must I do? What must I do?"

"Do as your heart dictates. Persist in his innocence, and stand by him in this the darkest hour of his life."

"I will! I will!"

"For the one you love it is your duty to forsake all and follow."

They walked on in silence while the birds twittered about, flitting from branch to branch and singing merrily. They seemed, in their sweet, innocent way, to strive to cheer the drooping spirits of the heart-broken girl. The timid hare paused on his hind legs and gazed at her with eyes filled with sympathy. The breeze that fanned her cheek was perfumed with the aroma of sweetest flowers. But all the efforts of nature to restore her happiness were in vain. Happiness is from within, and outward surroundings cannot affect it. If the heart is

light and gay, cold, hunger and a hovel are preferable to a palace with sadness.

They came to a beautiful rivulet, and at the root of a gnarled oak, covered with wild grapevines, seated themselves.

"How long will you remain here, Flora?" Mrs. Howard asked.

"I do not know."

"Do you wish to return home?"

"Not now."

"Why?"

"I could never see him if I was there."

"Your parents would object?"

"Yes."

"You will call on him again?"

"If I can."

"What will you do—" Mrs. Howard suddenly bit her lip and was silent.

"Why do you not finish the sentence, Mrs. Howard?"

"I had better not."

"No; you know my whole history; you know all, and I hope you will speak freely, for I have nothing to conceal."

"I was going to ask what you would do if he was convicted."

"Mrs. Howard, my heart belongs to Horace, and nothing, neither courts nor juries, can deprive him of it. I will be at his side during the trial and whisper words of love and encouragement as he stands at the criminal dock to receive his sentence, because I love him and know he is innocent."

"That is noble, Flora," said Mrs. Howard.

She sat a long time gazing on the ground. Her face was grave and thoughtful, and she occasionally heaved a sigh. Flora was young, but she was a careful student of human nature, and knew that the young woman's heart was heavy. Her offers of sympathy were genuine, for sometimes she saw her eyes growing moist, though tears never came. It seemed as if those fountains of grief were dried forever. Sympathy begets sympathy, and when she saw her poor friend looking so sad, she longed to do something to relieve her. She remembered what she had said about secrets and skeletons in the closet, and knew Mrs. Howard had some strange grief of her own.

"Mrs. Howard, when will your husband return?"

She started as if affrighted, and fixing her eyes on Flora, answered:

"I don't know."

"It must be very trying on you to have him away so much."

"Yes—yes, but it is business. Business is the most exacting of tyrants, and we have to bow to its will."

They rose to return.

The Howards were people without a past. One seldom is long with even a stranger or new acquaintance before, in some direct or indirect way, one will learn something of his past. It was not so with the Howards. They talked of the present, of the future, of other people, but never said a word about themselves.

Mrs. Howard became more talkative after awhile, and was decidedly profuse in her sympathy for Flora. Without advising her to defy her parents, she encouraged her to be true to her lover.

"It is God who joins hearts," she said, "and God never makes a mistake. Be sure, however, that you really love the man before you give him your heart. Be sure that it is God that says, 'Thou art his and he is thine.'"

"Let us return, Mrs. Howard," sighed Flora.

Neither the walk nor the conversation had given relief to her overburdened soul.

"Certainly, dear, if you wish it."

They were slowly returning, when a man, dressed in the garb of a cattle drover, with spurs on his boot-heels and a long linen ulster for a coat, suddenly stepped into the road and said:

"Mrs. Howard!"

"Wait a moment. I must speak to him," said Mrs. Howard, turning deathly pale.

"Do you know him?"

She made no answer, but hurried to where the man stood. They exchanged a few words, in a tone too low for her to hear what they said, but she saw the stranger slip a note into Mrs. Howard's hand, and the lady, putting it in her pocket, came slowly back to where Flora stood, lost in wonder at the strange meeting.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"'Sh! Don't ask. It is a friend with news from Mr. Howard. All is well."

"I would to Heaven I could say as much."

"Flora, keep quiet and say nothing of what you have seen, and perhaps my husband and I can do something for your lover."

"Oh! can you? Can you, Mrs. Howard?"

"There, don't. Be silent as the grave. We are working now, and will do all in our power."

They returned to the house.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TRAIN ROBBERY.

Sometimes in a fit of desperation a man will do a thing which he will repent a whole lifetime. A moment of folly, passion, or carelessness may bear evil fruit forever.

Arthur Westfall was not a natural villain. He had never entertained any romantic notions of a highwayman. A brigand's career had no charms for him. He became one without hardly realizing the step he was taking. For several days after meeting the stranger at the restaurant he lived in one of the cheap hotels in Kansas City in a back room. Here he met several men who he was told were his pals. They were a coarse, brutal class of

fellows, the outgrowth of the war, composing all the evil elements of society which had come to the surface during the great struggle and social upheaval in Missouri. Their language was coarse; they were, save one or two, vulgar, desperate villains, from whom one of refined tastes would shrink.

After a few days in the city they went into the country several miles away, to a neighborhood called Crackerneck, where they lodged at the house of a farmer, evidently no better than they. There were many strange visitors at the house while Arthur and Jackson remained there, and there was much whispering and consulting, very little of which the new recruit could understand.

A reckless indifference had taken possession of Arthur. He felt that the world had wronged him, and that he was justified in taking revenge. He was in a desperate situation, and unless some person or event interposed to save him, would plunge into irretrievable ruin. One day he was told they must go. No intimation was given him where they were to go or what was the object of the journey. A fine horse, already saddled and bridled, was given him, and in company with a black-eyed, wiry, nervous fellow with sharp features who answered to the name of Jim, he set forth one afternoon.

When they met people Jim did the talking, Arthur seldom uttering a word. That journey and the events following were ever to him like some terrible nightmare. His conscience smote him, and try as he would, he could not forget that terrible

scene. The people who had been wronged were ever before him.

They met the other members of the band, eight or ten in number, at a rendezvous agreed upon, and there the chief and some of his confederates held a consultation. What the object of it was the new pal did not know, nor had he any idea of the conclusion that was reached. The horse he rode was no more a dumb slave to the will of others than he himself.

The chief at last rode up to his side, and said :

"Now, young man, you have some work before you to-night. That phiz is not a bad-looking one, but it had better not be seen, or it may get you into future trouble. Take this and cover it."

He handed Arthur a black mask, which he adjusted over his face, while a shudder thrilled his frame, for he realized that he was about to engage in a desperate adventure that might end in death. His heart beat rapidly, his cheek grew alternately pale and red, between fear and shame. There is something grand and noble in a heroic death, when one dies in defense of loved ones or one's country, but the death of an outlaw is cowardly and mean.

He made a great effort to steel his nerves for the terrible ordeal. The chief of the banditti seemed to read his thoughts, and laying his hand on his arm, said :

" Arthur, you will be expected to take a hand in this. If you show the white feather, you know the consequence," and he held to his view a revolver. " We can't have any cowards or shirks in our band."

"What are you going to do?" Arthur falteringly asked.

"Hold up a train," was the answer, in a cool, indifferent manner, telling more forcibly than words could have done of what the nerves of the chief were made. "You shall share our toil and danger in this. I will assign you to the mail department."

Arthur bowed his head and was silent.

The entire band was masked. The chief commanded them to follow him, and they left the grove and galloped in silence over a long stretch of prairie until they came to what at first seemed a long, dark line drawn by a straight edge across the horizon. A nearer approach showed it to be a railroad.

There was no moon, but the stars shone from a cloudless sky, dimly lighting up the landscape. The banditti drew rein near the railroad, and Jackson, as the chief called himself, ordered them to dismount.

"Bob—Ed."

"Yes, sir."

"Take the horses back on the hill and hold them."

"Yes, sir."

The two men designated as Bob and Ed took the horses and led them to the top of a slight elevation, where there was a small grove of scrub-oaks and hazel, in which they found excellent concealment.

The chief then called to two of the largest and most desperate fellows in the band, and said:

"You will look after the engineer and fireman."

Two more were told to attend to the express car.

"Have you your hammers and crowbars?"

"Yes."

"You must knock in the door and force the agent to open his safe. You," laying his hand ou Arthur's arm, "will assist Jim and Bill to attend to the mail. Select out all the registered packages and such as seem of value. If he falters, Bill, shoot him down as you would a wolf."

This order was given as if the chief had a suspicion that the new recruit was not entering heart and soul into the work. Arthur felt his indignation rising, and would have revolted then and there had he not known that death would immediately result.

The chief went on:

"The remainder will help me with the passengers. Those who do up the mail and express must come and help us as soon as all valuable letters and packages have been secured."

Every man bowed in silence.

Never was a more uncomely group assembled on desperate business than those with whom Arthur Westfall had cast his fortunes. He realized now that it would have been very much better to have tramped and starved. The world had been very unjust to him, but he had been more unjust to himself. The great, dark prairie, the star-studded heavens, and the tall, dark forms with whose hair the night wind toyed, were to him a terrible nightmare. Was he to commit a crime, perhaps murder?

No, he was resolved to take no life, even though he lost his own for not doing so.

"Jim, you and Bill had better take up a rail," said the chief.

"Are you goin' ter ditch her?"

"Unless she stops at my signal."

The men designated as Jim and Bill procured some cross-ties and leaped down into the cut. Soon the creaking sound of spikes being torn out of the wood was heard, the rail was loosened and thrown aside.

"Place 'ties' on the track," commanded the chief.

It was soon done. Through the dim, uncertain light Arthur gazed at the obstruction and the loosened rail and thought of the hundreds of innocent people, even women and children, at that moment rushing to ruin and death. That obstruction and yawning chasm seemed to him the inventions of a devil. He could in his imagination see the train thundering on at lightning speed, then a crash, the hiss of escaping steam, cries of the wounded and groans of the dying. He could stand it no longer, and though it might be at the risk of his life, he went to the chief, who was lighting his lantern, and said:

"Can I speak to you?"

"What do you want to say?"

"Do you intend to wreck the train?"

"That is owing to circumstances," he answered.

"Will you signal it to stop?"

"Yes. But if they are fools enough to run on to

their own destruction, I can't help it. A place l been assigned you?"

"Yes."

"Go to it. The train will be here in a few minutes."

The chief then took his place between the r his dark lantern, with the light turned off, in hand. He looked like some grim monster, and Arthur gazed at him he thought him a fit imag represent the prince of darkness.

There was a dead silence. Anon there can quivering sound on the startled night w seemed to thrill the shuddering air. The new cruit bent his ear near to the earth, and from the faint murmur soon made out a heavy, rumb roar. It was the thunder of the midnight exp He started, his heart stood still, and he would fled had not his feet seemed rooted to the spot

On, steadily on, increasing in volume until the thunder of iron wheels became a steady roar, came the midnight express. Arthur saw the men as grim statues or demons from the infernal regions, ready to defy the on-coming monster, whose blazing eye, like a star of destiny, was seen over the distant hill. Then it disappeared around a curve, and the robbers still stood silent and unmoved.

Arthur shook as if in an ague fit. His knees knocked together, and he scarcely could stand. The wild roar of the train increased every moment until the ground trembled and the steel rails sang. At last from around the curve the great headlight burst, dissipating darkness before it as it flew down

the grade toward the robbers, the loosened rail and the barricade.

"Why doesn't he flash the signal light?" thought Arthur. "Has he changed his mind and determined to let the train be ditched and the people killed?"

The train was coming at full speed and approaching frightfully near to the barricade. Arthur Westfall thought of the mangled bodies of innocent passengers, and his soul grew sick. Though he knew it would cost him his life, he determined to make an effort to warn the on-coming train. There was no means of warning save to seize the lantern of the chief and flash a signal across the track. He was about to leap at him and tear the lantern from his hand—an effort that no doubt would have cost him his life—when that personage suddenly removed the slide and began waving the light across the track.

Immediately there came on the air an ear-splitting whistle, and the engineer threw on the air-brakes. The train began to slow up at once, but a heavy train going at full speed down grade is not easily checked, and Arthur held his breath, lest it should yet rush over the barricade and be wrecked. The chief continued to wave his signal light, and the engineer sounded his whistle for down brakes.

On, on and on it came—slower and slower, until the nose of the cowcatcher rested against the barricade of cross-ties. The engineer, looking out of his cab, asked:

"What is the matter?"

"Don't ye see there is somethin' on th' track?" cried one of the masked banditti, coming near enough for the engineer to see that his face was masked, and that he carried a revolver in his hand.

"Robbers, Flaxie! Train robbers!" yelled the engineer, seizing an iron poker and raising it to brain the masked man, who was coming to the cab.

"Hold! Don't ye try that!" shouted the outlaw, leveling a cocked pistol at the head of the engineer. "The first man who lifts a finger dies!"

The dangerous character of the Missouri outlaws was well known, and no one dared resist them. The engineer threw down his poker, and the fireman dropped the hammer he had seized. Two masked men leaped into the cab and bade the men sit with their backs together, tied their hands behind them and then bound them to each other.

Arthur Westfall stood as one spellbound, while the heavy, clanging blows rang out on the night air, until the express-car door gave way with a crash.

"Don't forget the work for you!" hissed a voice in the ear of the new recruit, and a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder and he was shoved toward the mail- oach. He entered it. His companions were already before him, and had seized a great bundle of letters, some of which were valuable, while the route agent cowered in one corner before the dark muzzle of a revolver, which one of the bandits pointed at his head.

"Here, look out the registered letters from this pack, an' be quick about it," said Jim, thrusting a large bundle of letters into Arthur's hand.

He took the bundle mechanically and began looking them over. Great care was not to be expected in a new recruit, and perhaps the outlaw knew there were few valuable letters in the package when he handed it to him. The act of looking over the mail was purely mechanical on Arthur's part, for his mind was not on the work in which he was engaged. At last his eye fell on a registered letter in the bunch, and he found himself staring at it. It was addressed to his uncle, George Weatherby, and had a Virginia postmark. He seized it as if it was an old acquaintance, a link that bound him between this life and perdition. After gazing carefully at the letter for awhile, he placed it in his pocket. Why he kept the letter, he did not know. The act was wholly mechanical on his part, and he could not have explained it had he tried.

CHAPTER XII.

THE INTERCEPTED LETTER.

"Are you in there?" asked the chief, looking into the mail car.

Arthur started at the sound of the terrible voice.

"Yes," answered Jim and Bill.

"Then come and let us go through the passengers."

Arthur's companions shoved him to the door, saying:

"Go on. Are you drunk?"

The man staggered to the door and reached the ground. The chief and two or three more went up by the side of the train toward the passenger coaches, and he followed them. They found the conductor and two or three trainmen standing near the first passenger coach, holding their hands above their heads, while a single bandit stood before them with a pistol in each hand aimed at their breasts, threatening to shoot them down if they lifted a hand to resist. Three or four more of the outlaws were amusing themselves by firing pistol shots into the tops of the cars, and frightening the passengers out of their wits.

"Did the new hand prove his worth?" asked the

bandit chief, as they hurried toward the passenger coaches.

"Yes," returned one of the robbers, "I gave him a bunch of letters, and he went at them like an old hand."

"Good. We will now see what he can do at lifting purses."

They reached the first coach, and Jackson cried:

"Up these steps, inside with you, and get to your work."

Despite the fact that the robbers were veterans in the business, they were, except the chief and one or two others, nervous and excited.

The frightened, cowering passengers gave utterance to shrieks of dread as the banditti, armed and masked, entered the cars with oaths and threats. An occasional pistol shot whizzed through the roof or shattered the glass of one of the windows. Some of the more collected passengers were making frantic efforts to conceal money and valuables under their seats; a few succeeded, but more failed. A perfect pandemonium reigned. The shrieks of frightened women, some of whom fainted, the crying of children and men pleading for life and valuables, mingled with the threats and oaths of the banditti, were enough to appall the stoutest hearts. One who has never witnessed such a scene can form but a poor conception of it, even from the description of the most gifted pen.

In the parlor car, seated on a reclining chair, was a beautiful young lady of about eighteen summers. She was asleep when the train stopped. The sharp

report of pistols, mingled with crashing glass, roused her, and she uttered a shriek of dread.

"What is the matter? What does it mean?" she cried.

A gentleman sitting near answered:

"The train is being robbed. We shall have them here soon."

A stunning report outside and the crash of the glass of the window near her caused her to shriek in fear. A splinter of glass had cut her white forehead, and the blood trickled from the slight wound. She grew faint and sick for a moment, but she was a sensible young woman, and placing her hand to her forehead, discovered that the wound was trifling. At this moment a tall masked man leaped in at the front door. He had a revolver in each hand, and in a terrible voice cried:

"Down! Down, all of you! I will blow the head off any one who dares resist!"

There was a general howling, shrieking and efforts to climb over one another, like frightened sheep when a wolf enters the fold.

"Oh, spare me!"

"Pray don't kill us!"

"Go away, Mr. Robber, and you may have all I possess!"

The fear of some was so highly ridiculous as to be amusing. Some were on their knees, praying, as if they expected this was the last moment on earth for them, while the tall train-robber, marching down the aisle, continued to shout, in a voice of thunder:

"Down—down, all! I will put a bullet through the first that dares lift a hand! Here, fork over your money, jewels an' sich little valuables! Git 'em ready, th' chief will be in soon, an' he will shoot every man who hain't forked over lively!"

Right and left he began collecting money, jewels and watches, which he put into his capacious coat-pockets. At last he came to the young lady who had been wounded by the splinter of glass and sat holding a silk handkerchief to her face. A single glance at her rich travelling costume and costly jewels told him that she was the child of wealthy parents.

"Here, Miss, hand over them gewgaws in short order!"

"What do you mean?" she asked in a voice wonderfully sweet, though it quivered with fright.

"I mean yer money ur yer life!" shouted the robber. "Don't ye understand that?"

She drew a richly jeweled purse, well filled, and gave it to him.

"Now yer watch an' chain."

They were costly and beautiful, and yet she parted with them.

"Now that air diamond ring," growled the robber.

"Sir, sir!" she stammered. "That is a present from my father."

"Don't keer who give it ter ye; I want et, an' I am goin' t' hev et! Stop yer snifflin' an' hand et over!"

She removed the ring from her finger and gave

it to him. His covetous eyes glared at the pretty face, and he saw two sparkling gems, one on each side of it, dangling from her ears.

"Here, gal, I want them ar' earrings. I know diamunds when I see 'em, an' them ar' wuth a fortun'."

"I can't get them out of my ears," she answered in a voice that trembled.

"Yes, ye kin."

"Indeed, I cannot; the hook is pressed fast."

"Then I kin."

"Please, sir, do not touch me," pleaded the beautiful girl, holding up one hand in an entreating manner. "I would really take them out if it could be done."

"Look here, gal, I ain't one to stand any nonsense! Now take 'em out!"

"I cannot without tearing my ears."

"Then tear 'em! I'm goin' to hev them diamunds!"

"Spare me, please, sir," pleaded the girl, tears for the first time coming to her eyes at thought of being mutilated and disfigured for life. She knew enough of the Missouri outlaws to know that this was no idle threat.

The brutal bandit stuck his pistol in his belt and drew a long, keen-bladed knife, and, with a terrible oath, swore he would have those earrings if he had to cut off the ears to get them. The frightened girl wept and implored, and made several efforts to remove them, but discovered that it was impossible; and as the horrible thought of being mutilated

came over her she turned her tearful face on the masked man and pleaded:

"Oh, sir, please don't! Spare me! I cannot get them out!"

"Then I kin!" roared the bandit, making his assertion more terrible by an oath, as he flourished his flashing blade above her head. "I will cut 'em out, ur cut yer ears off!"

She began to shriek for help, but he seized one of her ears and was about to draw the keen edge of his knife across the lobe and let the jewel out, when a strong hand seized him by the throat and hurled him down on his face in the aisle. It was not one of the passengers, but a man whose face was masked like his own.

"Dare touch her, and I will kill you!" said the low, determined but manly voice of the masked outlaw, and the polished barrel of a revolver glittered in the light of the car lamps. So desperate, bold and determined was the act that the outlaw was cowed and overawed. He rose to his feet and hurried to another car. The young lady whom he had saved from a horrid mutilation sprang toward her masked preserver, and seizing his arm, cried:

"I thank you, sir! May heaven bless you!"

"Will you trust me?" he asked in a voice low and sweet as any hero in fiction.

"Yes."

"Then by all the manhood left me I swear they shall not harm a hair of your head!"

"I believe you."

The masked outlaw gazed on that face radiant in

all its beauty, despite its unnatural paleness, and in a low, manly voice asked:

"Did he hurt you?"

"No."

"But there is a speck of blood on your brow."

"A slight cut from a piece of glass."

"I will kill him for it," he said, taking a small white cambric handkerchief from the seat and wiping the blood that oozed from her face.

"No, no. He did not do it."

He gazed a moment on that fair, sweet, innocent face, and seemed transported to the land of angels. Holding the small cambric handkerchief in his hand, stained with the blood from the wound, he listened to the gentle voice murmuring heartfelt thanks.

"But have you not incurred the hate of that man—the whole band, perhaps?" she said. "Maybe they will take your life for this."

"It will be a glorious death to die in the defense of the innocent," he answered. She fixed her great dark eyes on him in surprise. He gazed on the handkerchief which he held in his hand and said:

"I have one favor to ask of you."

"What?"

"Give me this."

"It is a strange request; but you can have it, and welcome."

Two or three masked men came hurriedly through the car, picking up such valuables as the others had left. The beautiful girl shrank from them, and actually clung to her preserver, who,

forgetful that he was one of the same desperate band, whispered words of encouragement in her ears.

He had only time to glance at that marvelously lovely face, to gaze for a moment into the liquid depths of those soft dark eyes, then the shrill whistle of the chief sounded on the air, and his deep, stentorian voice was heard saying:

"To horse and away!"

"Farewell!" he whispered to the beautiful unknown.

"May God bless and save you!"

The tender look which accompanied this ejaculation went down to the heart of Arthur Westfall to remain to his dying day. Often on his long night rides he found himself dreaming strange dreams, from which he would awake to say:

"No, no—how foolish! I am a poor outcast, and worse, a robber with a price set on my head. It is folly; it is madness, but it is pleasant. She must be the daughter of some wealthy man, some great man, and can never be anything to me, nor I to her."

Strange to say, Arthur was never even rebuked by the banditti for saving the young lady. The band made a halt that night and all next day in a dense wood. Arthur's degradation seemed to become greater every hour of his life, until he actually came to despise himself. Sometimes he tried to find some excuse for his career, but there was none.

"There can never be an excuse for crime," he thought. "Death by starvation is sweet compared with the most luxurious life of an outlaw."

As was their custom after a depredation, the robbers disbanded and scattered among their friends. Arthur and two others went to the home of a farmer named Thrailkill, who kept them concealed, while the officers were scouring the country in search of the train robbers. Half a dozen suspicious persons were arrested and held in jail a while, but for lack of proof discharged, and the affair died away.

A week after the robbery, Arthur Westfall, in his room in the attic of the farmhouse, for the hundredth time took the delicate handkerchief from his pocket to gaze on it, and dream over it. In doing so this time, his finger tips came in contact with the letter he had taken from the mail car on that night of the robbery, and which he had entirely forgotten. He drew it from his pocket and gazed on it with amazement. Despite all our philosophy, we are subject to strange influences and circumstances that seem to shape our destiny. Arthur found himself possessed of an irresistible desire to read his uncle's letter, but he could have given no valid reason for doing so. He opened the envelope and took the letter from it. Spreading it out before him, he proceeded to read, and as he read, amazement was depicted on every lineament of his features. The letter was as follows:

"LAW OFFICE OF ALLEN CRAVENSFORD,
"RICHMOND, VA., Aug. 17, 1879.

"MR. GEORGE WEATHERBY—

"*Dear Sir:* In answer to your last in regard to the estate of your nephew, Arthur Westfall, I will state that it is ready to be turned over to him at any time. In cash, bank stocks at par

value and unquestioned securities, it will reach quite half a million dollars. Of course, if your nephew was dead, you would be his only heir. If it is true, as you say, that he has been guilty of robbing his employer, Mark Hunt, and has been compelled to fly the country, and can be kept away seven years without being heard from, it would justify you in appropriating the money yourself. Should Westfall, however, learn that he is heir to such a vast fortune, he might return, disprove the charge and make us a great deal of trouble. You had better keep the matter a profound secret until Westfall is well out of the country, and then you can take charge of the estate in perfect safety. I accept the terms you offer me, and will help you all I can for the sum agreed upon. But this is risky business for both of us, and if we should be discovered it might place both of us behind prison bars; so destroy this letter, so there may not be any record testimony against us. Write me at once and tell me where Westfall is, and if there is any likelihood of disposing of him for good. Yours truly,

"ALLEN CRAVENSFORD."

Starting up, Arthur struck his forehead with the palm of his hand, and said:

"Heavens! I am the victim of an outrageous plot. I will go at once and lay this letter before some lawyer and—"

He paused. No, he dared not tell a lawyer that he was Arthur Westfall. That name was connected with crime, and an investigation might trace him to the last train robbery. He was powerless to claim his own or punish those who had, with such consummate art, planned his ruin.

Mechanically he drew the delicate handkerchief from his bosom, pressed it to his lips for the thousandth time, while his mind wandered to the soft, dark-eyed owner. He was heir to a fortune, which,

if there was no stain upon his name, might make it possible for him to win her. But the awful reality returned; he was a robber, with a price set upon his head. He groaned and sank into a chair.

CHAPTER XIII.

CATER'S REVELATION.

The forest about the deserted village of Newburg was large. The trees were oak and hickory, tall, broad-armed, proud of their strength and age and wealth of leaves. Every tree, like those of the "shadie wood" in which Lady Una wandered with the Red-Cross Knight, was "yclad with summer's pride." Not content with this, each forest monarch was decked out in graceful gray moss, which the languid summer breeze scarcely stirred that hot August day. A zig-zag fence, ten rails high, "staked and ridered," that had once run along the road leading to Newburg in its prosperous days, inclosing a vast area of forest, was out of repair. The rails were decayed in some places, and had been thrown down in others. Sometimes great gaps were to be seen, where the absence of the fence was

accentuated by a vigorous growth of sassafras and poke-berry. From one of these gaps, where the growth had been prevented by the tread of many feet, a broad path led to the center of the wood, where the negro church was to be found. A rude structure it was, built of unplaned pine planks set upright. The windows were exactly what the primary meaning of the word would indicate—wind-doors; for being of wood, no light could penetrate them, save where some knot permitted it to assume the semblance of a firey ball.

A rude paling had once inclosed the church, but now only a stray plank lying here and there among the bramble bushes and "jimpson weeds" told of its existence; and the cattle wandered not only through the woods but up to the very door of the tabernacle.

On one occasion, just about twilight, an old muley cow poked her head into one of the doors that hung half open on rusty hinges, and lowed so mournfully that little black Sam, who had run away from home to escape a whipping by allowing his mother's wrath to subside, was so frightened that he crouched down closer behind the rude pulpit and trembled with fright. Not that he was afraid of the cow. Oh, no! There was the terrible possibility that this lugubrious sound coming from the church might awake the "hants," and the "sperits" might come flocking from their usual stalking-ground, the graveyard back of the building. Scarcely had the echo of the sound died away, when footsteps were heard. Sam raised his head, and in the dim

twilight saw the form of a man entering the door.

It was too dark for his features to be made out, and all that Sam knew of him was that he was tall and had a remarkable resemblance to the description that had been given him of the guerrilla who had been hanged to the big oak down under the hill. There was a ghastliness about his features as seen in twilight, and the runaway negro boy was persuaded that he saw bright tips of blue and phosphorescent light, such as ghosts are supposed to emit from their materialized bodies.

"The hour has almost come!" said the ghost, in a low, hollow and almost sepulchral tone.

Sam could endure no more, and made a frantic leap for the window at the rear. He struck the hard shutter with a crash, and fell back like a wounded bat. Next moment he was seized by a strong hand, and hurled from the door of the old house with a violence that almost jolted the breath from his body.

He was on his feet and running before he was hardly conscious of the fact. Down the path he flew to the gap in the fence, half a mile from Uncle Reuben's Newburg tavern. Some one was coming in at the gap just as he was going out, and as both were travelling on the same line a collision was inevitable. Sam ran plump into some one, and had his ears boxed for his carelessness.

"Sam Scarce, wut ye mean a-runnin' inter me dat way?" cried a voice well known to the frightened boy.

"DARE TOUCH HER, AND I WILL KILL YOU!" SAID THE MASKED OUTLAW.

"Dat you, Unc Cater? Dat you! Oh, golly, doan ye let um git me! Doan ye let um git me!"

"Who goan t' git ye? Whut ye mean, ye no-account nigger?"

"De ghosts—de 'hants,' Unc Cater! Dey atter me right now!"

"Shet up yo' foolishness, chile, an' tole me whut de matter wid ye."

The boy was so frightened that it was some time before Uncle Cater could get him sufficiently quieted to tell his story. It was a terrible story of a specter entering the church and seizing him by the shoulders and hurling him from the building with such force that his neck was broken. Uncle Cater's blood ran cold, and he could feel his white wool almost start on end. He gave Sam a lecture on disobedience to his mother and on "desecratin' de house o' de Lawd" by hiding in it to escape a justly deserved whipping, and sent him home, while he returned to the tavern. The old darky kept the story to himself, but often, when alone, he pondered over the remarkable adventure of Sam at the church.

Three evenings later, just at dusk, Mr. Howard came to the tavern and let Cater take his horse to the barn. He was quiet, grave and mysterious as ever. He appeared with others at supper, however, and made some remark about perplexing business matters. As he was going, with his wife and children, to their room, he met Flora on the landing, and remarked that she was too sad for a young girl.

"At your time of life, you ought to be happy, my child."

"Sorrow is no respecter of persons or age, Mr. Howard."

After a grave and thoughtful silence for a moment, he answered:

"You are right. Even childhood has its vexations and annoyances. We commence life crying over a broken toy, and we end it regretting we can't have our own way. After all, the sage is only a grown-up child."

"Do we suffer more for ourselves than for others?"

With a curious smile, he answered:

"Miss Wells, it seems to me that half the world is born to make themselves miserable, and the other half is born to be miserable from sympathy."

"I believe it. Will you remain long?"

"No; I leave in the morning."

"You are gone a great deal."

"Yes, it is business—vexatious business." His wife had gone to her room, and he started to follow her, but when he reached the door, suddenly paused, and, returning to where Flora stood at the hall window, said: "Wife tells me you have a great sorrow—that—that a young man whom you respect—and—and love has been accused of a crime?"

"She has told you all?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Howard, she said you might help him. Have you any influence?"

"I cannot say that I have. I know but few people in power."

"He is innocent, Mr. Howard. I know he is innocent."

"Many, many people are wrongfully accused. Many people who are innocent are made to suffer for the offenses of the guilty."

"But they cannot convict him. You will not let him be convicted, will you, for you must know he is innocent?"

He started back and fixed his steel-blue eyes on her face, and asked:

"How can I know anything of his guilt or innocence?"

"But to simply gaze on his face is to find him innocent."

"But, my dear young lady, I have never had an opportunity of gazing on his face."

"True, I had forgotten that, Mr. Howard. But if you knew him as I know him, you would know that he tells the truth."

The strange man bowed his head, and said:

"Well, I am convinced that your lover is innocent, though I never saw him. You have interested me in him, and if I can do anything for him I shall."

He then bade her good night, and went to his room. Flora then retired, and, having passed so many sleepless nights, was soon in the land of slumbers.

Old Cater that night had taken his dogs and gone to the wood to hunt for coons and opossums. The sky was clear, and the moon still shone brightly

on his return. He had caught three opossums and one coon, and, quite elated at his success, paused near the old shed to gaze on his prizes with admiration.

"Dem 's fine, fat fellows," said the old man. "Wish de fur war good, but dis hain't no season fer fur. Aggy, she roast um." Feeling the ribs of one opossum, he added: "Golly, ain't he a fat un! Why, him ez fat ez him kin be; make a good roast. Now, ef we only had some sweet mataters, wouldn't he go good—"

Some one stirring at the house caused the old man to step within the shadow of the wood-shed, and whisper:

"Who dat comin'? Golly, it am dat Mr. Howard. Gwine away ag'in, iz he? Sed he war gwine ter stay all night, when he come."

Mr. Howard did not go near the barn where his horse was, but walked briskly up the road. The old negro's curiosity, excited by the mystery which had enveloped Mr. Howard all along, prompted him to throw his game on the shed and follow him.

The mysterious man went hurriedly up the road to the gap in the fence before alluded to, and then turned down the beaten path toward the church.

"Fore de Lawd, what am he gwine dar fur?" asked old Cater.

He recalled the story of little Sam Scarce, and paused for a moment with his eyes rolled up to heaven and his hands clasped.

"He don't know 'bout de 'hants,'" the negro whispered.

His first impulse was to run after the man and call him back, but he had come to regard Mr. Howard with a sort of superstition, no doubt from the many mysteries by which he was surrounded, and he had a little dread of accosting him in the darkness. Spellbound the old darky stood for several minutes. He was about to turn and go home, when curiosity to know if the man really dealt in the black art prompted the old darky to make his way to the church by a nearer path, of which Mr. Howard knew nothing, and he reached it a few moments ahead of him.

But the church was already occupied when the negro came to it. Crouching at the north window, Uncle Cater distinctly heard voices within. They spoke in low, even tones, and he could only catch a word now and then of what was said.

"It 's about time," said one.

The old darky's hair almost stood on end. Time for what? he asked himself. He was inclined to turn and fly for life, but he overcame that inclination and listened to more that was said. Those voices were too substantial for ghosts, and he found curiosity overcoming his fear. Moments crept by on leaden wings. A cold, icy breeze, seeming a blast of death from the graveyard near, came over the old darky, and for a moment almost froze the marrow in his bones. His teeth chattered, his knees knocked together, his breath came in fitful gasps, while his heart thumped so wildly that he feared those inside must hear it.

After a moment he heard the sound of footsteps

coming toward the cabin. He crouched still closer to the ground. There was a low whistle, followed by another, then some one entered. He could have sworn, to his dying day, that the newcomer was the mysterious Mr. Howard.

"Well, what news?" he asked.

"All is well," answered one of the strangers in the old church. Then followed a short silence, broken by one of the men saying:

"Here is a message for you."

"I will read it when I get to the light."

"What shall we do?"

"Return."

"Is that all?"

"I will see you soon."

Then came the sounds of persons leaving the church. Two dark forms stole away among the trees, mounted horses and galloped away. A few moments later a solitary form stole back to the broad, beaten path leading to the road to Newburg tavern, which Uncle Cater declared was Mr. Howard. Next day Mr. Howard took his departure on one of his mysterious journeys.

Cater took Uncle Reuben behind the wood-shed and in an awe-inspiring voice began:

"Unc Rube, dat man am might' curious."

"Why?"

"He goes ob nights to de churchyard whar de ghosts air an' call 'em up. I seed him go las' night to the church myse'f, an' sho's yo 's white man, Unc Rube, dar war two odder men wid him, an' dey talk in whispers like, an' den all go away."

Uncle Reuben thrust his hand in his trousers pocket, drew out a handful of tobacco and proceeded to light his pipe, while Cater continued his marvelous stretches of the imagination. When he had finished, Uncle Reuben said:

"Do you know what I think, Cater?"

"No; 'deed I don't, Unc Rube."

"I think you are an infernal liar."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FATHER'S THREAT.

If Uncle Reuben thought there was anything in old Cater's story, he kept his opinion to himself. Uncle Reuben sat in his large arm-chair, well worn with age and use, smoked his pipe and said nothing. He even admonished Cater to keep his mouth shut.

The days and weeks passed slowly on, and Flora was still at the home of Uncle Reuben. The summer was past and golden autumn had come. Autumn leaves of crimson and gold were to be seen in great abundance. The forests and prairies of Missouri still presented a scene of wondrous

beauty. The days were still delightfully warm, but the evenings were growing cool enough for fire in the broad-mouthed fireplaces, and Uncle Reuben suggested that it would soon be time for the hunters to come.

To one unaccustomed to such a treat, the spending of an autumn evening at any of the few remaining typical old taverns of the backwoods of Missouri would be like a revelation. There are, indeed, few left of these rare old gathering-places of hunters, wood-choppers, loggers and bark-peelers, where the big hickory "chunks" snap and crack in the wide, stone fireplaces, the warm reflection of whose flame, that dances fitfully at the sooty opening of the broad chimney, plays hide-and-seek with the shadows here and there and everywhere about the low-walled bedroom, while the old iron tea-kettle, hanging on its grimy crane, sings cheerily, and the measure of its song sets the clouds of steam to playing elfishly about it; where some superannuated hound, rotund and wheezy, dozes and dreams in indolent contentment on the hearth; where the sons of the forest, some young and lusty, some old and grizzled, but all picturesque in garb and tongue, lounge on bearskin-covered benches or chairs of stout and homely make, or loll in a corner on a tumbled couch of buffalo robes, heirlooms all, once the commonest and cheapest of furry comforts, now the rarest and most costly; where the red-faced, well-fed landlord passes to his rude customers their favorite rum and tansy or gin and sugar through the opening in the stout wooden grating between

the high oaken bar and the ceiling, just as his father and his grandfather had done before him, in the days when the stage-coaches rattled their lumbering way over the stony turnpike, and the blasts from the driver's horn sent the startled echoes flying over the hill. There were, even at the time of our story, but few, indeed, of these rare old hostelries. In all the great State of Missouri one might, perhaps, have counted all that remained on the fingers of one hand, and those that remained were, like Uncle Reuben's, in a moribund condition. They were the relics of another age. They stood, as some to this day stand, as monuments to the memory of a unique race of landlords, and as reminders of a rude but hearty hospitality, such as will never come again.

Among all these old-time landlords perhaps none held out so long against the inroads of modern innovations as Uncle Reuben. He clung to his old house and the deserted village, hoping that travel and business would again set its current toward Newburg.

Occasionally in autumn the deer-hunters came, but not in large parties, as they used to do, and the old stage-horn was never heard among the hills and forests about the town. No hunter had yet come, but Uncle Reuben lived in constant expectation of a party. He used to sit on his long porch of an afternoon and watch the sun descend beyond the great hills and forests of the west, and ask himself if they would not come next day, next week or next month. Often, when he had smoked his pipe

out, he lay back in his chair and dozed and dreamed of the wheels of the stage-coach and the sound of the horn echoing among the hills. But only in memory, dreams and imagination would that sweet music ever fall upon his ear again.

One evening, as he sat in his accustomed seat, a vehicle came down the road from Rushville. He got upon his feet, and as it became evident that it was coming to his house, he went to the picket fence which divided the yard from the forest. It was near enough for him to recognize it as one of the carriages of McCoy's livery barn at Rushville. The vehicle drove up to the gate and stopped, and the driver said:

"Here 's the place."

A man got out, and asked:

"What 's your bill?"

"Oh, ye kin settle that when I take ye back. When d' ye want me t' come after ye?"

"In time to catch the train to-morrow night."

"All right."

The coachman then turned his vehicle about and drove away to Rushville, leaving the passenger, with a small-sized travelling-bag in his hand, standing near the stiles. He waited until the vehicle had started, and then approaching Uncle Reuben, took his hand, and said:

"How are you, Uncle Reuben?"

"Ain't this Jordan Wells?"

"Yes. How are you?"

"Well. When did ye leave home?" asked Uncle Reuben, showing the way into a large front room.

"I left yesterday."

"How 'd ye leave all the folks?"

"Well."

"Set down," and he pushed one of the bearskin chairs toward Mr. Wells.

The merchant's face was very grave and firm, while there was a deep, sullen flash of fire from his eyes which spoke of a conflagration within. He threw aside a light topcoat, took off his hat, and threw himself in the proffered seat, and glared into the fire.

Uncle Reuben, standing in a corner where the ruddy glow of the leaping firelight imparted a healthier complexion than was natural, thrust his hand into his pocket, drew out a handful of tobacco, and proceeded to light his pipe.

After glowering at the fire for several minutes, Mr. Wells asked:

"Where is Flora?"

"Up in her room. D' ye want t' see her?"

"After awhile," he answered, with the air of one who had a disagreeable task which he wished to delay as long as possible.

"Had yer supper?"

"No."

"I 'll tell Rachel an' Aggy t' set ye some. We 've all eat long ago."

"Never mind me," growled the merchant, still looking at the fire.

Uncle Reuben, who was a little deaf, did not catch the last sentence. He went to the kitchen, where he found Aunt Rachel and the ever-faithful

Aggy washing the dishes and doing up the evening work.

"Rachel, Jordan Wells has come," said Uncle Reuben.

"Jordan Wells!" cried Aunt Rachel, dropping her dishcloth and raising her hands.

"Yes; and he wants his supper."

"Fix his supper, Aggy," said Aunt Rachel. Then, turning to her husband, she added: "Now, Rube, Jordan's heard o' that visit."

"I don't keer 'f he has."

"I bet he 's come here t' give Flora fits."

"We couldn't help it. Don't believe she ort t' gone, though."

"Now I don't know so well about that," declared Aunt Rachel. "I believe I 'll just give Jordan a piece o' my mind."

"Better 'tend t' yer own business."

"Well, no, I don't know but that it 's my business t' look after Flora while she is here, an' if Jordan Wells is treatin' her wrong, he ort t' be told of it."

"How 's he treatin' her wrong?"

"Why, when he saw that th' poor young things loved each other, instead o' sendin' her off and dischargin' him, he ort t' a let 'em waited, an' if they still loved each other when they had growed up, why, let 'em marry."

Uncle Reuben thought that it might have been some trouble to have got them to wait. There was a creak on the stairs, a breath of perfume, a whisper of soft robe, sand Flora Wells glided into the

kitchen. Her face was whiter than usual, and her eyes seemed starting from their sockets.

"Aunt Rachel—Uncle Reuben!" she gasped.

"Mercy goodness, child, whatever is the matter o' you?" cried Aunt Rachel. "Ye look ez if ye'd see'd a ghost!"

"Has father come?"

"Yes."

"I knew it. He intends to take me away. Uncle Reuben, don't let him do it."

"Don't ye want t' go home?" asked Aunt Rachel.

"No, no, I must not go!"

She knew that if she went home there would be no more opportunity to see Horace, whom she had determined to stand by during his terrible trial.

"Flora, yer father won't let ye stay," remarked Uncle Reuben, diving his right hand deep into the pocket of his trousers for tobacco with which to replenish his pipe.

"He must let me stay. I don't want to seem rebellious, but I will not go home."

"Suppose he's come after ye?"

"There must be some excuse. Persuade my father by some means to leave me here."

Aunt Rachel and Uncle Reuben exchanged significant glances. The shrewd wife at last said:

"Leave it all t' me. I will try t' manage him."

"Will you make him let me stay?"

"I will try. Now go back t' yer room."

"I must stay. I can't go home now," she declared, as she went back to her room.

Supper was prepared for the traveller. Aunt

Rachel saw that it was palatable and tempting in every particular. When she went to the great sitting-room to invite him in, she wiped her hands on her apron, smiled graciously, and said :

"Why, howdy, Jordan? Who 'd ever a thought o' seein' you in Newburg? How 's Susan an' all th' other folks?"

"They are pretty well, Rachel," the merchant answered, with lowering brow.

"Come out t' supper."

"I am not very hungry."

"Well, come and eat a little anyway, and ye 'll feel better by it. We ain't got much, but I reckin ye kin put up a while with what we put up with all th' time."

When he was seated at the table, she took a chair at his side and insisted on pouring his tea, keeping up a stream of talk all the time about his family and friends at home. Jordan Wells answered her questions, but showed no disposition to be communicative. After supper was over, he asked for his daughter.

"She is up in her room," said Aunt Rachel. "Flora hain't been very well, but I give her some yarb tea, an' she 's better. I 'm goin' t' keep it up fur a week ur two until she 's entirely better."

"Humph !" grunted Mr. Wells, in a rather discouraging manner.

"She wuz very low in sperits when she come, but I 'll bring her out all right," Aunt Rachel declared.

The merchant pushed back his plate, and rising from the table, asked to be shown to his daughter's room.

An artist could not have found a better model for a domesticated dryad than Flora, as she sat by the window gazing off into the forest. The door opened, and she started up, saying:

"Father!"

"Sit down, Flora."

Her first impulse to throw her arms about his neck and plead for mercy gave way to sullenness and rebellion. The cold, harsh manner of her father had roused all the stubbornness in her heart. He took a chair near her and said:

"Flora, you went to Standish?"

She made no answer.

"Did you think you could go without my knowing it?" She made no answer, and the father's wrath and indignation rising at her silence, he burst forth with: "Flora, if you are determined to disgrace yourself and your family, I will disown you!"

"Father, he is innocent."

"Silence! How do you know he is innocent? Did not two reputable witnesses recognize him when his disguise fell off? I know he is guilty, and if you persist in following the fortune of a common thief, I swear I will disown you!"

She bowed her head and tears silently stole down her cheeks. The father, utterly unmoved by her sorrow, continued to upbraid her for going to Standish, concluding his remarks with a threat to lock her up if she repeated the act.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. MEEKER'S STRANGE INTERVIEW.

General Hawley was away when Odin, the bookkeeper, so suddenly and mysteriously left the city, and, on his return, Mr. Meeker assured him that everything would go on all right, and that he would attend to the books himself until a suitable person could be secured.

"But this is putting double duty on you," said Mr. Hawley.

"I can do it. I must do it," said Mr. Meeker.

"I could telegraph to St. Louis or Chicago for an expert—"

"I assure you, General, that it is wholly unnecessary."

"It would relieve you."

"I would rather wait and select one that will exactly suit," returned Meeker.

"Very well, if you prefer. I will leave the whole matter to you," said General Hawley.

"Then it shall be attended to."

"It must be done before the State funds arrive."

"How soon do you expect them, General?"

"Within two or three weeks. The treasurer has

not decided yet when he will send them, but it cannot be longer than three weeks."

"I will secure a suitable person before that time. Leave it to me, and it will be carefully attended to."

"I know it. I know it, Meeker. I feel so confident of your honesty and ability that I do not have the least hesitation in intrusting everything to you."

"Thank you. I assure you I shall not find it a burden."

When alone, Meeker said:

"If Bob Maddox doesn't succeed in bringing about that interview, I am ruined. As a last resort I will make one more appeal to Grace. She has just returned from Chicago, and, I learn, was nearly frightened to death by the train robbers who held up the midnight express on which she travelled. Maybe the scare has opened her eyes to the necessity of having a protector. At any rate, I will make one appeal and see if there is any hope in that quarter."

The office boy was sent to Miss Grace Hawley with a note, saying that Mr. Meeker would call upon her that evening at eight. At the hour mentioned he was at the Hawley mansion, and was ushered into the great parlor, where he amused himself gazing on the family portraits on the wall until Miss Grace made her appearance.

She was polite and courteous, as usual, but there was nothing in her manner that was the least encouraging to Mr. Meeker's hopes. He was a man

of unbounded egotism and perseverance, however, and did not despair. He was prudent, cautious and scheming.

"I have not seen you since your thrilling adventure with the train robbers, Miss Hawley. I hope you have not suffered from the shock."

"I was almost prostrated for a day or two," she answered. "One of the robbers, the tallest and most brutal of all the band, threatened to cut my earrings out of my ears because I could not unclasp the fastenings. But there is one noble man among them. He came to my rescue, knocked the rascal down and protected me from further insult—I fear at the cost of his own life."

"He could not have been a noble fellow, or he would not have been with such a gang," said Meeker.

"He must have some excuse for being with them. He is a brave, noble man, and I would give much to know his history."

"Young and handsome?" asked Meeker, with a little sarcasm in his voice.

"I did not see his face, for it was covered with a mask."

"Well, Miss Hawley, I am glad he saved those pretty ears. You could not have spared them. I hope this adventure will teach you a lesson. You must have a protector with you all the time—one who will guard you not only from masked men but all the ills which the weaker sex are exposed to." Then, with consummate art, he gradually neared the subject which had brought him to the mansion,

concluding with a desire for her to reconsider her answer to his proposal. She quickly told him she would not.

"Miss Hawley, I fear you do not understand the situation."

"I perfectly understand it," she answered; "and knowing that I can never love you sufficiently to become your wife, I must decline to discuss the matter."

Appealing to her was in vain, and when he began to make covert threats, he at once saw that he was on dangerous ground, so he bade her adieu and took his departure.

"Something must be done, for I am in a devil of a fix," he thought, as he walked down the broad avenue of trees that led to the street. His face was clouded, and he was desperate enough for any measure. He had not gone three blocks before he almost ran against a man coming toward him.

"Bob Maddox, is it you? The very man I wanted to see."

"Yes? Ain't this Cal Meeker?"

"It is."

"I started out to find yer."

"Why, Bob?"

Bob looked up and down the street and said:

"It 's all right."

"What, Bob? Have you seen him?"

"Yes, an' it 's all right."

"Can I see him?"

"Yes."

Just then a person was seen coming up the street, and Mr. Meeker whispered:

"'Sh! Come to the old mill in half an hour," and walked away

The heart of the cashier beat high. He felt that the beginning of a desperate plan was at hand. A wicked smile was on his face, and he thought:

"My proud beauty, you will rue the day you rejected me! I shall soon have it in my power to make you a beggar. Strip you of your wealth, and half your charms are gone. I wish the robber had cut off your ears and destroyed your beauty forever!"

His heart stirred by these bitter reflections, he hurried to the mill. He had not been there long when Bob Maddox came in, and carefully closed the door behind him.

"Bob, is it all right?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Can I see him?"

"Ye bet."

"When?"

"Ter-night."

"That is all I can ask. You shall be paid for your work. Where am I to see him?"

"I dun know."

"Don't know? Then how am I to find him?"

"Wall, all I know erbout et, Cal, is that ye air ter mount a hoss at midnight an' go with me erlong er road till we meet somebody."

"What road?"

"I warn't ter tell that. Yer ter foller me."

"I 'll do it, but I don't see what reason this man can have for keeping me in ignorance of the road I am to travel."

"Wall, ye ort ter know, Cal, thet them fellers ain't agoin' ter let ye git ther drap on 'em."

"I don't intend to try."

"They don't think ye will; but ef ye did, ye couldn't. Now, 'f ye 'll do ez I say, an' come with me, it 'll be all right; ef ye don't like th' way they do business, why, thar ain't any harm done."

"I will go!" Meeker declared.

He was in a condition to brave any danger.

"D' ye know whar th' big oak iz on t'other side o' ther bridge?"

"Yes."

"I 'll be thar at midnight. D' ye come prepared fur a all-night ride."

"I must be in the bank at daylight."

"Ye 'll be back all right, Cal. Don't ye be skeered."

At any other time Mr. Meeker would have resented the coarse familiarity of the vulgar fellow; but, repugnant as it was to him, he was compelled to endure it.

He promise to be at the place mentioned at midnight, equipped for the journey,

"Ye needn't bring er gun with ye, fur ye 'll be searched, an' they won't 'low ye ter carry any arms."

Meeker bowed and they separated, Meeker to return to his hotel and his companion to the saloon to await the time.

At midnight the cashier might have been seen mounted on a splendid horse, riding toward the appointed rendezvous. He found Maddox waiting

for him, grim and silent. He uttered not a word until Meeker was at his side, and then in a sepulchral tone said:

"Come on!"

At the point of meeting the road branched off into five forks going in as many directions. As Bob spoke he wheeled his horse into the narrowest, dimmest path and galloped away, with Meeker at his heels. The dim, almost unused road took them into the deepest, darkest part of the forest. For two or three miles they jogged along until they came to where the road crossed a ravine.

"We stop here," said Maddox.

They stopped, and almost immediately two masked men stepped from the thicket at the roadside, and, advancing to the cashier, asked:

"Who are you?"

"Calvin Meeker."

"Ye want t' talk with our chief, do ye?"

"I want to see the man—Bob knows who."

"D' ye still want t' see him?"

"Yes."

"It 's dangerous business t' see th' chief, an' some as see him hev repented o' it. It 's not too late t' turn back 'f ye want to."

"I will see him at all risks!" Meeker desperately returned, though his blood almost ran cold in his veins. "If he doesn't help me, I am ruined."

"Lemme tell yer, stranger, ef ye try ter come any shenanigan over th' capen, yer goin' t' git fooled, an' hev yer brains blowed out inter the bargain. See?"

"I am in earnest. I can put him in a way to make money for both of us—all of us."

"Wall, since ye insist on et, git down," said the masked man, in a hoarse, disguised voice. Meeker dismounted and stood at the side of the road, while one of the masked men advanced, with a large, black handkerchief.

"Must I submit to that?" he asked.

"Yes."

He made no response, and the handkerchief was bound over his eyes. Bob Maddox, having performed his share of the work, rode back to town, leaving Mr. Meeker in charge of the masked strangers.

When the cashier was blindfolded, he was led to his horse, where his foot was placed in the stirrup, and he assisted to mount and tied to the saddle. In a few moments he heard the trampling of horses' feet about him, and then a voice said:

"All ready!"

"Let 's go," said another.

The cashier's horse was started forward, with a man on either side of him. They pushed on down a forest path. The cashier knew from the uneven ground that they were traversing an unfrequented path, and the leafy branches of trees flapping against him was proof positive they were riding through a wood. Not a word was spoken by his guides as they hastened with him through the forest. They traveled a long distance, sometimes over the prairie and sometimes through the deep wood, preserving silence.

At last, after what seemed an age to Mr. Meeker, there came a low, sharp whistle on the air, and almost immediately a hoarse voice said:

"Halt!"

They came to a standstill. One of the guides remained with the blindfolded Meeker, and the other rode forward. The prisoner could hear him talking with some one. Then he came back and said:

"It's all right; come on."

Again they advanced a short distance, when they were again halted.

"Dismount!" commanded a strange, gruff voice.

"I can't. I 'm tied," Meeker answered.

"Loose him and let him dismount."

In a moment the cashier was untied and dismounted, though still blindfolded. He made an involuntary effort to raise his hand to the handkerchief which covered his eyes, and the cold muzzle of a revolver touched his temple, and a voice said in his ear:

"Don't you do it! Just touch that and you are a dead man!"

His hand fell at his side, and some one seized his arm and led him forward a short distance.

"Here are steps. Lift your foot a little higher." He did so. "Now bow your head, and save yourself getting a bump."

He did so, and next moment found himself inside some sort of a house. The floor was rough and uneven, and seemed composed of loose boards laid on sills. There were voices all about him, talking in

unintelligible whispers. The cashier found his blood running cold as these whispers and shuffling feet were heard on every side. At last the same deep voice which had done all the talking said:

"Remove the handkerchief."

It was taken from his eyes, and he found himself in a small apartment, the bare walls of logs indicating that it was one of those deserted cabins of hunters or wood-choppers. On an old pine table a solitary candle burned, dimly lighting the dingy room. Six or eight men, each wearing a mask over his face, stood about the room. There were three or four old chairs, two stools and one bench in the apartment. These, with the table and a sort of cot in one corner, constituted the entire household furniture. At a wave of the hand from the tall chief the men slowly left, and the chief and the cashier alone remained.

"Sit down!" said the tall, masked man, pointing to a stool, while he threw himself on the bench.

The trembling cashier obeyed. The masked man said:

"I am told that you are in trouble. Now I want you to speak freely, for we cannot come to terms unless you do."

"I am in trouble."

"What is the nature of it?"

"Short in my accounts," was the answer.

"Where is your bookkeeper?"

"He has been induced to take a position in a bank in Iowa."

"Then he is disposed of; that is good. I have

learned that a large amount of State funds are soon to be deposited in the Hawley bank."

"You were correctly informed."

"What is the amount?"

"Possibly half a million."

"That, in addition to what the bank already contains, will make it a valuable bird for plucking."

"Yes, sir. That is what I wanted to see you about."

"Ah!"

"I propose to help you, if you will make a division with me. I can do much to help you—can have the safe open and all the funds easily to seize at the proper time. I can by signals and signs communicate to you when the funds have been received."

"That is all a very nice plan, but are you really in earnest about this?"

"I swear I am."

"Do you know that if you attempt to betray us you will be shot? Even if you were to succeed in betraying the whole band, and causing the arrest of every one, we have friends enough left to revenge us. If you play the traitor, your life will be forfeited."

"I understand all."

"Then, if you understand all and mean business, let us talk business."

"I mean what I say. Bob Maddox knows me, and knows I am in earnest."

"You need not mention names. But you say you are short a bookkeeper?"

"Yes."

"It is necessary for your safety and ours that we have a bookkeeper in the bank whom we can trust."

"Yes."

"I have such a one. Can you manage to secure the position for him?"

"It has all been left to me."

"Good. Then the bookkeeper is secured. Now, when he presents himself at the bank you must take him in at once, and give him the position."

"But who will he be? What is his name?"

After a moment's thought, the chief answered:

"He will be called George Fowler. It is not necessary that even you should know his real name."

"When will he come?"

"This is Tuesday; he will be at your bank Friday morning."

Mr. Meeker bowed. It was getting late, and as it was necessary that Mr. Meeker should be in town before dawn of day, the preliminaries were hurried through with, he was again blindfolded and taken to the horse, without having the least idea where he had been, nor could he have known a single person he had met, should he have seen them next day.

CHAPTER XVI.

ARTHUR'S NEW EMPLOYMENT.

Arthur Westfall was still at the house of the farmer who had harbored three of the band after the crime. The events of the last few days seemed a troubled dream to him, in the midst of which a face wondrous fair and soft, gazelle-like eyes would sometimes appear. He could not banish that face from his memory, and but for the handkerchief, which he took from his bosom half a dozen times a day, he might have thought the incident on the midnight express only a freak of his fancy. In his dreams he saw her, beautiful as a houri, pure as an angel, and often asked himself why he could not have died for her in the car, when he defied that whole band.

If ever there was a case of love at first sight, it was that of the young bandit. Now that he was in love and heir to a fortune, the life of a bandit became doubly disgraceful and contemptible to him.

"Why should I not have learned all this before?" he groaned, when alone. "Oh, accursed fate that dooms one to such tantalizing disappointments! Why didn't I die in her defense and end this sickly dream of life?"

Imprisonment in a dungeon would have been pleasant compared to hiding in the house of this farmer. His two companions amused themselves with a pack of greasy cards, singing ribald songs, or with coarse jests, utterly disgusting to him. One night, as he sat in the small back room where the three were stored like pigs in a sty, Mr. Jackson came in and said:

"Well, Arthur, I have new work for you."

He started, trembled and turned pale, while he gasped:

"What is it?"

"Why, what is the matter with you, young fellow? Have you been chalking your face, or suddenly taken with an ague fit?"

"No."

"Well, you look it; but you needn't go to trembling and turning white, for this job is not a dangerous one. Do you understand bookkeeping?"

"Yes."

"Then you are the man. We want you for a bookkeeper in a bank."

"Are you going to open a bank?" asked Arthur, in amazement.

"Yes, we propose to open one and take all that is in it," the bandit chief answered with a laugh.

"I don't understand you."

"Then I will explain."

He proceeded to tell him of Meeker, the cashier, being short in his accounts, and of the plan he had taken to cover up the deficit, and at the same time get a good share of the plunder. Arthur was in-

formed that he was to go to the bank and be installed as bookkeeper, where he might always be on hand to watch the bank and give them due notice of the arrival of the State funds, so they could make the raid, clean out the cash and escape the town. With the cashier and bookkeeper for confederates, they were sure of success.

There was no choice for Arthur in the matter. He was a slave to the man's will; so he sat mute and silent, while his master, the chief, proceeded to lay out the details of the pernicious plot. Next day he went to the depot and boarded the train for Starkeville. He was an utter stranger in this part of the country; and there was little danger of any one recognizing him. On the day agreed upon, he presented himself at the bank and asked:

"Is Mr. Meeker in?"

A man with steel-blue eyes and dark-brown whiskers presented himself, with an insidious smile on his face, and answered:

"I am that person. Is this Mr. Fowler, the new bookkeeper?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am happy to see you."

He shook his hand and invited him inside.

"Now, I suppose you would like to see your private office?"

"Yes, sir."

They entered the private office, the door of which was close to the bookkeeper's desk. Mr. Meeker closed the door, and looking him over, said:

"They made no mistake in sending you."

Arthur returned no answer, but stood near the iron safe in which the books were deposited, his eyes on the floor.

"I suppose you have been told to trust Calvin Meeker?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am sure we will get along all right."

"I hope so."

"You have had the books explained?"

"Not fully."

"Well, for any explanation you may need, come to me."

"I will."

Mr. Meeker went to the door of the office, looked out to see if any of the clerks were near enough to hear what they were saying, but finding all the employees of the institution at their places, he closed the door and came back. In a whisper he said:

"The State funds have not arrived yet."

"When do you expect them?" Arthur asked, mechanically.

"In a few days. We don't know exactly when the shipment will be made. Now go to work, form the acquaintance of the clerks, and when the president comes, I will introduce you to him. You must play a shrewd part so as not to arouse suspicion. I hope you will make a favorable impression on the president, and I believe you will. The books are not exactly straight; you know that," he whispered.

Arthur nodded.

"That matter must be kept a profound secret."

Arthur nodded again.

"You have kept books before?"

"Yes."

"For a bank?"

"No, a merchant, but I understand the business well."

"The less you understand it the better," said the cashier, with a strange smile. "Now you will go to the books and set to work at once. Look them over."

Arthur was duly installed, and an hour or two later was poring over them with the determination of understanding them. He had not gone far before the crookedness of the cashier became evident, and he made mental notes of the false entries. His course was not fully mapped out yet, and he was working more like some one in a dream than in real life. But all the while he entertained a strong hope that some unexpected miracle would intervene to save him.

"Oh, Heaven, am I lost beyond all redemption?" he groaned that night when he reached his room at the hotel.

Next day he met the president of the bank, Gen. Frederick Hawley. The young bookkeeper liked the General from the first, and the liking was mutual. When the good old man grasped the thin hand of the youth, and gazed into his sorrow-stricken face, he saw that here was a young fellow who had suffered mentally. He spoke some words of encouragement to him, so the youth realized that here was a person whose friendship was sincere.

"And he is the man I am sent to rob, perhaps murder," he thought.

"I hope you will like your position, Mr. Fowler. We have much for you to do, and you must not forget that you stand right in the line of promotion."

Arthur humbly thanked him for his kindness, and tried hard to hope he was worthy the trust reposed in him. As he was standing by his desk looking through the books, a hand touched his shoulder and a voice whispered in his ear:

"How d' you like the old man?"

He turned and saw the grinning face of Mr. Meeker, his sharp, white teeth gleaming through his dark whiskers. Never, even among his bandit associates, had he seen a visage so diabolical. Meeker was a fiend incarnate, and his smile the smile of a devil. Outlaw though he was, Arthur Westfall felt that he was a being worse than himself. There was a torrent of fury in his breast, but he had learned from experience to school himself, so that outwardly he was calm as a summer's sky. He glanced at his interlocutor a moment, and answered:

"I like him pretty well."

"You made a good impression on him, my boy. Keep it up—keep it up, and the thing will work charmingly."

It took a great effort on Arthur's part to restrain himself from knocking him down; but he turned to the books, and the cashier went away from his desk.

Arthur Westfall had been in the bank a week, and during the time had frequently met the president, with whom he had become a favorite. Every hour in that good man's presence was torture to the bookkeeper who was planning his ruin. One afternoon, near the closing hour, Arthur was at his desk, which was not far removed from the president's chair. General Hawley was dictating some letters to his stenographer, and having finished them, he turned to glance over the paper that lay at his side. The door was opened by some privileged person, and the rustle of a dress was preceded by a merry voice, sweet as a silver bell, saying:

"I caught you, papa! I was afraid you had gone!"

That voice caused Arthur to start. Heaven, how it thrilled him! He involuntarily turned and saw before him the image of his dreams, the fair unknown whom he had met and saved on the midnight express. It was her face, her voice, and the same brilliant gems sparkled from the ears he had rescued from the bandit's knife. His brain reeled, his head swam, and he tightly clutched his desk, or he would have fallen.

Fortunately, the young girl and her father were too much engaged on some personal matter to notice his agitation, and a few moments later they left the bank together.

A clerk came to his side and whispered:

"That's the old man's girl. Ain't she a beauty, though? They say Meeker is stuck on her, and it 'll be a match. Lucky dog, that Meeker."

He made no answer, but bent over his books until the closing hour, and then hurried to his hotel, rushed to his room, and closing and locking the door, threw himself on the couch, hoarsely gasping:

"It is her face! It is she!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. HOWARD'S SUDDEN DISAPPEARANCE.

The autumnal sun hung like a ball of fire in the western sky, thinly veiled by the hazy blue of Indian summer. The forests in their gaudy plumage of vermilion and gold presented a scene far more lovely than an artist could paint. The ripening fruits yielded up a sweeter perfume than the roses of May and June; and all nature with matured beauty seemed smiling with peace and plenty. In the rebellious heart of man only could discord and sorrow be found.

No picture was more entrancing and enchanting than Flora Wells, as she sat by the window, the faint glow of the smoke-clouded sun falling on her face, giving to it a beauty beyond description. With

all the beauty of autumn, there was a sadness. The grass once so green had become a golden brown; the flowers so gay and sweet were gone. It was the preparation for death and burial, and nature only waited for the winding sheet of snow, the sleep of death, to prove to the mind of sinful man the doctrine of the resurrection with spring. But no autumnal beauty was more sad than the pretty pale face of Flora Wells, as she sat by the window gazing on the far-off blue hills, sighing, while an occasional tear stole down her cheek.

Her father, through the persuasions of Aunt Rachel and the assurance that nothing but her "yarb tea" would save her life, had consented to leave her at the secluded inn for awhile longer, though he gave her to understand that it would fare much better with her lover if she gave him up altogether. She made him no promises and answered only with tears and sighs. She had read in the papers that Horace would in a few days have his preliminary examination before a magistrate, and then for the first time the prisoner would face his accusers. The papers stated that the excuse on the part of the officials for not having the examination sooner was a fear that the prisoner might be lynched if he was taken from the jail. Many of the good people who had suffered financially by the bank robbery had no good feeling toward the prisoner. When Flora read this she sat and shuddered, and hoped and prayed that her unfortunate lover might escape such a fate.

She had not heard from him since her visit,

though she had urged him to write to her. He had not been permitted to do so before, though he had often asked for paper, pen and ink. It was thought that he only wanted them to notify his confederates about the weakness of his prison, that they might effect his rescue. At last he persuaded the jailer's wife, who sometimes visited him, to furnish him with writing material, just to write one letter, and that letter to a lady. She held out at first, until she learned that he wanted to write a love-letter, and promised to let her read it. He told his little love story, and it was so pathetic that it moved her heart, and she agreed to furnish him the material and mail his letter for him. This was, of course, all done without the husband's knowledge.

On that very evening, as Flora sat by the window, bathed in the smoke-dimmed glory of the descending sun, Cater was on his way from the post-office, with the precious epistle in his pocket. Cater rode the old sorrel horse, and had something of the resemblance of a traveling commissary. There was a sack of flour across the animal's withers, while a long bag hung across the back of the saddle, with coffee in one end and sugar, starch, soda, toilet soap, spices, teas and sundry other household necessities in the other. It was well balanced, and the negro riding in front kept it in place. As the negro rode along the path to Newburg tavern, his long legs dangling about the thin sides of the horse, his mind was wholly occupied with the mysteries that had of late involved the old inn. His ignorant, superstitious

mind was filled with stories of ghosts, witches and fabled monsters, the creation of many wild and grotesque imaginations.

"Bet Massa Howard am a witch!" he finally concluded. "Dat am it. He am a witch. Mighty good ter me, though, ef he am. Give old Cater two dollars ebery time he put his hand on de hoss. Now whut dat man ax me so many questions at de store 'bout? He don't git nuffin' frum dis nigger."

He reached the old tavern, and, laying the flour and bag of groceries on the woodpile, put the horse in the barn, and then carried the "things," by which he meant the recent merchandise purchased at Rushville, into the house. Then he watered and fed the horse, fed the pigs and split stove-wood, and when he had "done up all his chores," went into the kitchen to sit by the stove until time for supper. He was taking his usual nap in the corner in the kitchen when his wife awoke him and told him his supper was ready. He started up, and by the merest accident thrust his hand in his pocket and discovered the letter he had brought from the post-office. He stared at Aunt Aggy and then at the clock that ticked on the mantel, and discovered that it was almost seven.

"What de matter wid ye?" asked Aunt Aggy.

"Golly, dar am dat lettah!" he gasped.

"Whut lettah?"

"De one I brung frum town fur Miss Flora, an' I dun clean fo'got it."

"Git up dar an' gib it ter her mighty quick, afo' ye furgit it ag'in."

Uncle Cater started up the stairway as fast as his legs could carry him. Flora was sitting at the window when he entered and said:

"A lettah for you, Miss Flora."

She took the letter, glanced at the superscription, and recognizing the handwriting, while old Cater scampered down the stairs, cried:

"It 's from Horace!"

Tears of joy started from her eyes. Her heart leaped wildly, and a fond hope suggested that he might be free. She lighted her lamp, and with trembling hand broke the seal and sat down to read. The letter was full of tenderness, love and Christian hope, yet through all there was a dark tinge of despair. It was as follows:

"STANDISH, JAIL, ——.

"DEAR FLORA: I do not give the date, for I have taken no account of time lately, and know not what day this is. Through the kindness of the jailer's wife I have been enabled to write this letter. I know that you have not forsaken me in this dark hour, and though it might be better for me to remain silent, yet I cannot resist the desire to correspond with you. Let us hope that God in heaven will not permit these dark clouds to always enshroud us in gloom. Let us hope yet for happiness; if it comes not in this life, perhaps it will in the next. I have nothing to write, save that I am still enclosed by these prison walls, and that life has only one warm spot, which is made by your love. Oh, it shines with such power that it illuminates even this dark prison cell, and I can almost thank God for my misfortune, for nothing else would have given me such unbounded assurance of your affection. I am sometimes told that the people are growing more quiet and willing for the law to take its course. I have learned the day that the robbery was committed, and am trying to find the man I travelled with that afternoon, in order to prove

an *alibi.* I have given the full particulars to my attorney and intrusted him to work up my defense. But he is young, inexperienced, and, it seems to me, does not take the subject to heart as he should. But I will not annoy you with further details of my case. I have the blessed consciousness that I am innocent, that you love me, and I would rather walk to the scaffold with that assurance than be declared free and innocent, doubting your love, or knowing I was guilty.

"Flora, hope and pray. That is all you can do now. Much as it would delight my soul to see you, I will not ask you to come, because it will only embitter your father against us and my cause. May God bless you, darling; and should I never behold you again, I will ever hold you dear to my heart; and should I die a free man or in a prison cell, your name will be breathed with my parting breath. Forever yours,

"HORACE."

Tears were streaming down her cheeks, and her eyes were so dim before she had finished the letter that she could hardly make out a word. She kissed it again and again, bedewing it with her tears, and prayed God for help and mercy as she had never prayed before.

In the midst of it all she heard the loud clatter of a horse's hoofs below, and next moment the voice of Mr. Howard came from below, speaking in mild, even tones to Cater:

"Put him in the barn, remove the bridle, and feed him, but leave the saddle on."

Looking out from her window, she saw old Cater shaking his white, woolly head as he went away to the barn with the horse. A moment later the quick, nervous tread of the mysterious Mr. Howard was heard on the stairs. He hastened to his wife's room. She was standing in the door.

"J—"

"'Sh! You forget yourself."

"How long will you stay?"

"I don't know."

"There is bad news?"

"How could there be, my dear? You look as if you were scared almost out of your life."

"I have such a dread—"

"Of what? Come in your room and don't be exciting the whole house into wonder."

They entered the room and closed the door, and yet Flora, whose curiosity was excited, could not but keep her eyes on their apartment. She heard the low murmur of voices, and mingled with them was a sob. The children began to cry, no doubt from sympathy, but were silenced by persuasions and threats. Then all became quiet.

"Perhaps, after all, he is going to remain all night," thought Flora. "One thing is certain; Mr. Howard is having some trouble."

Then she returned to the window and sat there a long time, her thoughts going back to her imprisoned lover. The pale stars shone dimly from a murky sky, and the hush of night was broken only by the grunt of a pig, or the occasional drop of an acorn in the forest, which year by year was creeping closer to the old house.

Suddenly there came on the night air the furious dash of a horse's hoofs. Some one was coming at full speed toward the old tavern, and the next moment she saw a horseman mounted on a dark charger galloping down the road. He reached

the gate, and drawing rein so suddenly that his horse was brought almost to his haunches, flung the rein over a picket, leaped from the saddle and ran to the long porch, and, with the butt end of his riding whip, gave several raps on the door. Before Uncle Reuben, Aunt Rachel or Cater could respond to the knock, Mr. Howard, hat in hand, flew down the stairs.

"Bob!" he whispered.

"Come on quick!"

Not another word was spoken. Mr. Howard ran to the barn, placed a bit in his horse's mouth and, with the newcomer, was flying over the hill before Uncle Reuben could reach the door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ARTHUR WARNED.

Arthur Westfall, much to his surprise, grew daily more in favor with General Hawley. There seemed a peculiar affinity between them, such as makes people friends at sight. The more Arthur saw of General Hawley's character the greater became his admiration and respect for him.

"I am going to take a drive after banking hours, George," said General Hawley to his new bookkeeper. "Would you like to come with me?"

"I will hardly have time; the books must be squared."

"You have worked hard. You need a little recreation. You can come back in time to balance them. Come on."

He felt that he was a double-dyed villain for accepting a seat in the carriage of the man whom he was planning to rob, and perhaps murder. Yet he could not refuse his kind invitation, and at the hour of closing, a span of prancing bays, attached to the General's splendid landau, was drawn up to the curbstone in front of the bank, and the General said:

"Now jump in, George, and I will give you a spin about town."

Silent, yet with heart wildly beating and conscience racking his soul, Arthur Westfall climbed into the carriage, and away they went flying over the stony street.

"I hope you find your position pleasant," said the banker, when they were started.

"I have no cause to complain."

"Our former bookkeeper left rather mysteriously and suddenly."

"Perhaps he had an offer of more money."

"No; I made special inquiry about it, and learned that he received the same salary."

"Maybe the other place was more agreeable."

"I can't believe it was. He seemed perfectly satisfied."

"He might have thought the climate more congenial."

"He was in excellent health, and had no cause to complain of the climate."

"Maybe he did not get along well with the other employees."

"No; Meeker was his friend, and secured him the position. There is some deep mystery about it which I cannot fathom."

"How long has Mr. Meeker been cashier?"

"Six years."

"He thoroughly understands the business of the bank?"

"Yes; he is faithful and honest."

Arthur Westfall knew just how honest he was. He knew there was not a greater scamp in existence, and felt that, bandit though he was, he was an honor compared with such a double-dyed scoundrel as Calvin Meeker. After an hour's drive General Hawley let him out at the bank, and he went in to balance the books, late as it was.

Next day Meeker came to the new bookkeeper and said:

"The old man seems stuck on you, George. That's right; get into his good graces all you can. Make yourself his chum as much as possible, for we can work things better by it."

The bookkeeper could hardly resist his natural inclination to knock him down, but he bit his lips and remained silent.

Two or three days later, just as they were closing

up for the day, the cashier called him into his private office and said:

"There is a friend to see you."

"Who?"

"I am not at liberty to give his name."

"Where is he?"

"Be at the old mill at midnight and I will bring him."

"Have I seen him before?"

"No doubt."'

"Have you seen him?"

"Not to-day, but Bob Maddox, who is message-bearer between us, knows him, and has informed me that there is to be an interview to-night which you are to attend."

"I will be there," said the bookkeeper, though he was trembling in every limb. He instinctively knew whom he was to meet. Closing the bank, he went to his hotel, feeling desperate. "How am I to get out of this?" he asked himself. "Is it better to follow the dictates of conscience and meet death sure and certain at the assassin's hand, or be swept on by the fiery blasts of temptation into that perdition which yawns for me?"

A terrible struggle between good and evil was raging in his breast, with fearful odds in favor of evil. To do the right was certain disgrace, prison and death; to do the wrong there was a chance of prolonging life, and possessing unlimited amount of ill-gotten gains. The devil, who is always ready to assume a virtue when it suits his purpose, kept whispering in his ear, "Honor" and "Never be-

tray a friend and a pal." Would he not be a cowardly traitor now to betray his comrades in crime? But to a young man with Arthur's good sense, that objection was soon swept aside. He knew it was not honorable to keep a dishonorable compact; that one was not a traitor who repented and betrayed an accomplice in crime. There is no maxim so false as "honor among thieves." There can be no honor among such men. They are selfish, and stand ready to betray one another when it is to their own selfish interest to do so. Nothing but selfish interests or the fear of some superior mind holds them together as a bond for the perpetration of a crime. When once the crime is committed, or it is no longer apparent that they have any mutual interests, they stand ready to betray one another.

At the appointed hour Arthur Westfall went to the old mill. The mill was dark, and as he approached, it seemed deserted, but a man suddenly started up from behind a tree and said:

"Wait a minute, stranger."

Arthur stopped and the man came and touched his arm, saying:

"Ye want ter go in thar?"

"Yes."

"Wall, ye better lemme show yer, 'cause how it's kinder dark."

He took Arthur's arm, and leading him around a wing of the old building, they entered at a side door.

"We gotter be mighty keerful, ye know."

"Yes."

"Now stoop yer head a leetle, so's not ter git a bump; thar ye air. Thar's a step down here, an' now we're in a kind uv a hall, so let's git along. Here's er door, and," opening the door, "thar ye air."

They were in the small office in which Mr. Meeker had held his first interview with Bob Maddox. It was so intensely dark that Arthur could not see any object in the room. But Bob Maddox suddenly flashed a dark lantern, and he saw sitting in a far corner of the room a tall man with a cloak drawn about his shoulders and a mask over his face. Without rising, he waved Bob out.

"Sit down," he said.

Notwithstanding his features were concealed, the young bandit at once recognized him as the chief, Jackson. After a brief silence, the chief drew his stool a little nearer to the bookkeeper, and in a low voice, asked:

"Did you expect me?"

"Yes."

"You see I always have my eye on you, my boy."

"I know it."

"I can see a great way off. There is no field-glass that will reach as far as my natural vision."

"He seems to know my very thoughts," the bookkeeper said to himself.

"Now, as Hamlet's father's ghost says, I have come to 'whet your almost blunted purpose.'"

"Do you think my purpose blunted?"

"Perhaps not, but there is danger of its becoming so."

"How?"

"You seem a favorite of the president, General Hawley."

"I was advised to court his favor."

"By whom?"

"Meeker, and you instructed me to follow his dictation in all things."

"That is true—strictly true," said the chief. "You were told to obey Meeker, and you have obeyed him."

"Then, sir, what have I done that is wrong?"

"Nothing that is wrong in itself," returned the chief, "but I have come to point out a danger."

"What is it?"

"The banker seems to have taken a strange fancy to you, and you to him."

"I was advised to make the best impression on him possible, in order to insure success."

"That is all proper, young man. I don't say that you have yet done anything wrong; but you are young in the business. You have long been accustomed to—to what the world calls good society, which, after all, is no more honest than our own. Now you are not only young in the business, but young in life. You have all the world before you, and you have not shown that keen relish for the life of an outlaw which I had hoped you would at the beginning of your career."

"Have I ever faltered?"

"I will not say you have, yet you do not seem to have your heart in the business."

"Perhaps it is because I am new in it."

"That is the excuse I framed for you, and I trust I am correct. But let me proceed. You might come to the conclusion that you could tell your story to this old banker, enlist his sympathy, betray us, lead us into a trap, and through the influence of General Frederick Hawley, secure a pardon for your past offenses. Have you not entertained such thoughts?"

"No, sir."

"Really, has no such thought flashed in your mind?"

"It has not."

"Well, if it does, let me forestall anything of the kind by assuring you it would be impossible, and that even if it was possible, and you should betray us, we leave enough friends behind to shoot you down for so dastardly an act."

"I understand that."

"Even if we should be killed or captured, you would not live three days. There are men occupying high positions in society who are our friends. You little dream the strength and power of our association. When one once arouses it he has secret foes everywhere, from whom it would be as impossible to escape as from the darkness of night."

"Mr. Jackson, you talk as if I had some such thought."

"I have no evidence," the chief answered. "But you are carefully watched. We watch and warn, whether there is cause to do so or not."

"If you prefer, I will treat the president with coldness. He urged me so strongly to ride with

him that I dared not refuse; at least, it did not seem good policy."

"No, no, no, you don't understand me. I want you to get in his good graces all you can. Talk with him, get his confidence, and learn all about his business and the bank."

"I have already learned much."

"Does he talk freely?"

"Yes."

"Confide in you much?"

"He seems to confide in me all one could ask on so short an acquaintance."

"Did you learn when the State funds would arrive?"

"He expects them in a few days."

"Does he yet know the day?"

"No."

"The day they arrive you are to leave a red handkerchief in the window opposite your desk. It will be seen by some one who will communicate the fact to us."

"I understand."

"Now go back and keep your purpose keen. Win the old man's good will, pump him dry, and when you get a good point give it to Meeker."

"Are you sure he can be trusted with everything?"

"Yes."

"Is that all?"

"It is. Go now, and I will disappear in a moment."

Arthur returned to his hotel and retired to bed.

CHAPTER XIX.

HORACE ARRAIGNED.

Horace Rathburne's day of examination for the bank robbery at Standish was drawing near. Under the laws of Missouri, a person accused of a crime is examined before a magistrate, who, if he judges him guilty of the offense, requires him to give bail for his appearance at the next term of the Circuit Court, if the case is bailable. If it is not bailable, or the accused cannot give bond, he is committed to jail, to await the action of the Grand Jury.

Horace's lawyer was a young man named Hyatt, of little experience or ability, and when it came to making a defense in such a case as this, he felt utterly lost. One day he called at the cell of his client, and asked:

"Can you give me some idea where I can find proof for an *alibi?*"

"On the day of the robbery I was twenty miles from Standish, and all the afternoon, until dark, in the company of a man who called himself Grogan."

"Where does he live?"

"He did not tell me."

"What sort of a looking man was he?"

"He was a tall, fine-looking man, with dark-

brown whiskers and blue eyes, about thirty-five years of age. He had the air of a business man, but his face showed exposure to sun and weather."

"Where did you meet him?"

"On the road, which runs through a vast forest, twenty or twenty-five miles south of Standish."

"He was on horseback?"

"Yes, sir; he rode a roan horse, with one black ear. I particularly remember the horse, because one ear was as black as jet."

"Did he tell you his name?"

"Yes; he said his name was Grogan. He was going in the direction of Joplin."

"Perhaps he lives there?"

"I did not understand that he did; but it might be well to make inquiry at that town about him."

Acting upon this advice, the lawyer wrote to the Postmaster, the Chief of Police and the Mayor of the city of Joplin, inquiring about a man calling himself Grogan, riding a roan horse with a black ear. But they knew nothing of such a person, and Mr. Hyatt began to despair for his client. The examination had been set for Wednesday, and on Monday Mr. Hyatt and the prosecuting attorney, Mr. Crompton, paid the prisoner a visit.

"I have done all I can for you, Rathburne," said Hyatt. "I can't find this man Grogan."

"I know not where he is, but surely he can be found," the prisoner responded, while Mr. Crompton sat sniffing the air suspiciously, as a pointer might when the game is near.

"I doubt it," declared Hyatt. "I don't believe any one can find him, and, without him, it is hardly worth while to attempt a defense."

The prisoner sighed.

"He may yet be found."

"Let me make a suggestion that will lighten this matter all round," said Mr. Crompton, his nose in the air, which he sniffed. "If Mr. Rathburne will only look at it in a reasonable way, and turn State's evidence, I think we can arrange to enter a *nolle* in his case, and he can leave the country."

For a moment the prisoner gave him a stare of astonishment, and then said:

"Please explain more fully."

"Well—ahem!—Mr. Rathburne, you see the matter is just this: We can't help you unless you will let us. Now there is no need denying your guilt. Everybody knows that it is useless, and you would get several years less if you plead guilty. If you would be willing to turn State's evidence, you know, and give us the names of your accomplices, why, I will, providing what you give me leads to their arrest and conviction, enter a *nolle* so far as you are concerned."

Firmly fixing his eyes on the lawyer, Horace answered:

"What you ask is absolutely impossible."

"Why?"

"I have no accomplices. I have committed no crime to which I can plead guilty."

"Oh, young man, you know not how such stubbornness injures your case," said the prosecuting

attorney, sniffing the air. "If you would confess, you would fare much better."

"I will not confess," declared the prisoner, firmly. "How can I confess to that of which I am guiltless?"

The prosecuting attorney turned away and shook his head seriously, muttering something about the persistent stubbornness of some people. He had hoped to make an easy conquest in the case, gain a confession which would lead to the arrest and conviction of others, and ultimately to his own renown. After a moment he returned, and taking his position before the prisoner, said:

"Mr. Rathburne, for the third time, do you persist in denying the facts of which you are accused?"

This time the prisoner only gave an emphatic nod.

"I am extremely sorry for you," declared the prosecuting attorney, with a look of contempt. "Now I must insist on the full penalty of the law."

The two attorneys went into the hall and consulted a few moments, while the prisoner sat in silence on the bunk. After several minutes they returned, and Mr. Crompton said:

"Your attorney—who looks more to your welfare than any fame or honor he may gain—and I have discussed your case. He has permitted me to ask for the last time: Will you make a confession and turn State's evidence?"

"I am innocent," was the answer.

"Then, sir, how do you explain these mysterious circumstances that surround you?"

"I assure you I do not know."

"You then deny?"

"All."

"Good day!" The prosecutor clapped on his hat, and, evidently in no good humor at being baffled at every point, left the prison.

Hyatt stood with his arms folded, his head bowed, looking meek and crushed, and more like a condemned criminal than one who was to defend. He was really sadly disappointed that his client did not plead guilty, and thus let him out of an awkward dilemma. For a young lawyer to defend an unpopular client, sure to be convicted, was almost like professional suicide. He turned his sorrowing eyes on the prisoner, who raised his head and gave him a stare. The prisoner was more composed than his advocate.

"If you do not want to take my case, you need not," said Horace. "If you cannot enter heart and soul into my defense, perhaps I can find another, or do without one altogether."

"You do not understand me, sir," said Mr. Hyatt. "I am not going to abandon you. I shall do all I can for your cause, but it seems so utterly hopeless that—"

"That you would advise me to plead guilty to an offense I never committed?"

"No, no, no! Really, I—that is—I mean it would have simplified matters a great deal. You see, since my failure to find Grogan of the roan horse with the black ear, I am pretty badly handicapped."

"Do the best you can. I am innocent, and will not admit a lie to save my life."

The lawyer raked his fingers through his long hair, and saying, "Oh, where the deuce is the roan horse with the black ear?" hurried from the jail."

The prisoner threw himself on his couch and tried to sleep. Sleep was the only comfort he had, and he never closed his eyes that he did not feel the wish in his heart that he might never wake again. As the time drew near, the prisoner became more anxious for the examination. The jailer brought him his meals, but seldom spoke. His fellow-companion in the next cell, having served out his term, was discharged. His departure affected the prisoner who remained but little, for Horace cared little for company. His own thoughts were his best companions.

At last the day for the examination came. He was glad of it. He would once more be permitted to walk in the open air, although that walk would be a short one, for the office of the committing magistrate was not far from the jail. He brushed his clothes with his hands, a barber was permitted to come and shave him and trim his hair, which had grown to a considerable length, and he sent out and bought a new shirt and collar.

"The time has come to go, Horace," said the jailer. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Put on your hat."

He had had such little use for a hat for the last few weeks that he had almost forgotten that he had one. He took his hat down from an iron hook, and

the jailer, approaching him with a pair of handcuffs, said:

"Roll up your sleeves, my boy."

He did so, and the jailer enclosed each wrist in a circlet of steel, and then added:

"Come on."

The news that the great bank robber was to be actually led out into the open day had spread all over the town, and hundreds of men, women and boys were standing on the streets, or sitting on rail fences, or crowding the windows and doors to see him go by.

"There he comes! There he comes!" shouted the boys as the prisoner emerged. The hooting and yelling were taken up all along the line, and louder and louder swelled the chorus until the very earth trembled under the shouting.

Undaunted, conscious of his own innocence, and heedless of the consequences, the prisoner walked boldly between the jailer and a deputy-sheriff along the street. The mob closed in after them, yelling like demons, and twice the deputy-sheriff was compelled to drive them back with his stick. At last the court-room of the magistrate was reached. The room was packed to its utmost capacity. The magistrate, a man with iron-gray hair and pale-blue eyes, a face wrinkled and a form bent with age, was in his seat behind his desk, his docket open, waiting the appearance of the prisoner.

Horace was led along the aisle made for him in the dense crowd that packed the court-room. The magistrate put on his glasses, and feeling about

among his papers, found the information, and opening it, read it aloud to the prisoner in a solemn, trembling voice. The information was in the usual form, charging him with unlawfully, knowingly, feloniously, etc., robbing and conspiring to rob the Standish bank, which said bank, it was alleged, was a corporation under the laws of the State of Missouri, and concluding with "against the peace and dignity of the State." When the old man had finished reading, he glanced at the prisoner, who, still handcuffed, stood meekly before him, and in that same solemn and impressive voice, said:

"Now, Mr. Rathburne, you 've heard the charge against you, are you guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," was the answer in a firm, unwavering voice, which caused the crowd to mutter:

"What impudence!"

"Sich brass!"

"He 'll weaken yit, see 'f he don't."

"He needs a hempen necktie."

"Silence in the Court!" bawled the magistrate, as he proceeded slowly to write the plea of the prisoner on his docket. This done, he again glanced over his spectacles at the lawyers, and asked:

"Now, gentlemen, are ye ready?"

"I am," returned Mr. Crompton.

"And you?" with a bow to Mr. Hyatt.

"I believe I am."

"Mr. Clerk, have you plenty o' paper to write the evidence?"

The clerk answered that he had. There was a

general hubbub all over the house, and a crowding and pushing of the people, this way and that.

"Silence in Court! Mr. Sheriff, you must preserve order, or we shall have to clear the court-room. Now, gentlemen, proceed."

CHAPTER XX.

A DISHONORABLE PROPOSITION.

The prosecuting attorney called his witnesses. There was the cashier of the bank, the bookkeeper, clerk and paying-teller, then John Layman, the merchant, Sim Dodson, Cris Martin, Enoch Ralls, Jack Auglin, the village blacksmith, and half a dozen others who were witnesses to the robbery. These stood up and were sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The cashier was the first witness. His story of the robbery was that on the day it was committed, near the hour of closing, two men entered and asked him to change a bill. He took the bill, examined it to see if it was good, and turned to get the change, when a noise caused him to look at the men again, and he saw one of them with a cocked re-

volver leveled at his head, threatening to kill him if he moved or made any outcry. The other kicked open the wire screen and began raking all the money into a bag which he carried on his arm. One of the clerks attempted to interpose, when the man who was covering the cashier fired at him, slightly wounding him in the shoulder. The other employees were either driven from the building or made to stand with their hands above their heads, and all the money save a few cents was taken.

The story was corroborated by other bank employees, none of whom recognized any one.

"So far they have proven nothing," Hyatt whispered in the ear of his client.

Mr. John Layman testified to being first attracted by a large crowd on the street, which he learned had collected over some excitement about "swapping horses." He had noticed considerable excitement before the shooting began, and then ran behind his counter and remained there until the robbers had left the town. He counted three bullet-holes in the weatherboarding of his store building after the fracas was over. He did not recognize anybody, and could not swear that the defendant was present. He saw one man about the size of the prisoner who had on a false beard and wig.

"How do you know he wore a wig and false beard?" asked Hyatt.

"Some one said so."

Mr. Hyatt objected to any evidence that might be "hearsay," and the Court sustained the objection. The witness was told to stand aside.

Enoch Ralls next took the stand. He was in his shirt-sleeves, short of stature, stoop-shouldered, broad-chested and had a very bald head and very small blue eyes beneath shaggy gray eyebrows. He was slow of motion and speech, and came forward at a shambling gait and took the witness-chair, with his hat in his hand. He told how his friends Jack and Chris and himself had seen the horsemen come in, and that "just on the crossing opposite the bank they met some more and begin talkin' about swappin' hosses."

"State if you went close to them," said Mr. Crompton, with an additional sniff at the air.

"Yes."

Then Enoch told how he and his friends went to where they were to look at their horses.

"What kind of horses did they ride, Enoch?" asked the prosecuting attorney.

"Wall, they rid purty dog on good hosses, lemme tell ye, sure ez yer a foot high."

He then proceeded to tell how the trade was consummated, by which one man was to pay the other a certain "amount of boot," and that he sent them to John Wiseman (the cashier of the bank) to get their money changed. He saw them go into the bank, and he and Jack were giving the horses a closer inspection, when all at once the shooting began. He was sure the first shot was fired in the bank, but did not see the man who did it. He recollected running into Jack and both falling.

"Did you see the defendant that day?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"While they were a shootin'."

"Where?"

"In the street."

"How?"

"Wall, his hoss jumped clean over me, an' he wuz throwd right on my back, an' his whiskers come off an' I saw his face as plain as plain could be."

"Were you acquainted with the defendant?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known him?"

"Wall, I reckin I 've knowed Horace goin' on to three years."

"Are you sure it was him you saw that day?"

"Jist ez sure ez I am a-settin' here."

The confidence and truthfulness with which this was uttered shocked even the prisoner, and he felt almost like asking himself if it was not possible that he did the deed in a temporary fit of insanity of which he had now no recollection. Though submitted to the most rigid cross-examination, Enoch did not vary from the original story.

Next came Jack Auglin, who corroborated the statement made by Enoch Ralls, though he admitted that there was considerable excitement at the moment he saw the face of the robber, and that he was not as cool as he usually was, for he was scrambling to get out of the way; still he was reasonably sure it was the defendant who had fallen on the back of Enoch Ralls and lost his false whiskers and wig.

"If we only had the man on the roan horse with

the black ear, there might be some hope," Hyatt whispered in the ear of his client. "It may, after all, be a case of mistaken identity."

Other corroborative evidence was introduced, and the State made out one of the strongest cases possible. No witness for the defendant was introduced; and the old magistrate, who sat all through the examination with his spectacles pushed back on his forehead, now adjusted them over the bridge of his nose, and said:

"Well, gentlemen, the duty of the Court is plain. No one can doubt but that the *corpus delicti* has been proven; and with no evidence for the defense, it looks as if he had committed the offense. I will have to bind him over to await the action of the Grand Jury." Glancing at Mr. Crompton, he asked: "How much bond ought the Court to require?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Oh, no. Five thousand dollars will bring him, I reckon. Mr. Hyatt, can you give it?"

"It is impossible, Squire," the attorney answered.

"Then I will remand him to jail in default of bail."

So Horace was again taken back to prison. Disagreeable as that prison was, it seemed a relief to get away from the angry faces and tiger-like glances of the people in the magistrate's court. He wrote a second letter to Flora, telling her of the examination, and among other things stated:

"If we can find my travelling companion of that afternoon, I am saved. I can by him prove an *alibi*. His name was Grogan, and he rode a roan horse with a black ear, but what has become

of him is a profound mystery. My lawyer has written and asked about him, but the earth seems to have opened and swallowed him up."

Days wore slowly by. It was three months before the next session of the Circuit Court, and as the Judge was too busy to call a special grand jury, the prisoner knew he would have a long time to wait.

About a week after his preliminary examination, he was sitting in his cell, when the jailer came and said:

"There is a visitor to see you."

"Who?" cried the prisoner, starting up, wondering who it could be; and a tall man with a dark coat well buttoned up to the chin entered his cell. He wore a broad-brimmed hat slouched over his face. Beneath his hat could be seen dark-brown, close-cropped chin whiskers.

"This is Mr. Horace Rathburne, is it not?" asked the newcomer.

"Yes, sir."

"I want to talk with you. Jailer, I would be alone."

As he had placed a five-dollar bill in the jailer's hand as a present, that functionary made an obsequious bow and retired.

"I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance," said the prisoner, glancing at the cavalier-looking stranger.

"I doubt if we ever met before; nevertheless, I am your friend. Please sit down, for we can talk here alone and uninterrupted."

HIS GUIDES HASTENED WITH HIM THROUGH THE FOREST.

The prisoner was greatly puzzled at his visitor, and began to make a mental inventory of him as he sat before him. He had a cavalier-like air. His broad-brimmed hat sat jauntily on one side of his head, revealing a face that was bold and handsome. The steel-blue eyes were perfectly fearless as they shone in the light of the solitary candle that burned in his cell. He was a horseman, for he carried a riding-whip in one hand, and spurs jingled at his boot-heels.

"I hardly know how you can be interested in me," said the prisoner.

"Wait and see." The stranger spoke in a low, cautious tone, scarcely above a whisper, and seemed very much in earnest. "I know your story."

"I suppose all the world knows it, but none save one knows the truth."

"Don't be deceived. There is one more than your sweetheart who knows the truth. But, young man, listen. To speak plain English, you are in a bad box. You know it. Your salvation depends on two things."

"What are they, sir?"

"There are two ways to extricate you from this trouble. As usual in the ways of this life, that which is surest is the harshest; that which is mildest, most uncertain."

"Explain."

"If you can prove an *alibi*, of course you are acquitted. That *alibi*, sir, depends on a certain man who rode a roan horse with a black ear. It is barely possible that a jury might not believe him."

"You have been talking with my attorney?"

"Indeed, I never met the gentleman."

"Then how do you know of the roan horse with the black ear?"

"I know everything, my friend. I see everything and hear everything. No field-glasses reach so far as my natural vision, and I have had my eyes on you for some time. Now would you like to be free?"

"Certainly."

"It can be done."

"When?"

"Soon; but before I set you at liberty, let me talk with you. What I do for you is done at a great risk. I run a great risk in coming here, but I can't explain. You say you are innocent?"

"I am."

"The world won't believe you. Even if the roan horse with the black ear is found, the jury would convict you. Some one has lost money, a bank has been robbed, the public has been outraged, and a victim must be found. You are the one offered, and you must be the sacrifice. Now you had *as well have the game as the name.*"

"Why?"

"You are called a thief, a robber, and you might as well be one. Suppose a band of bold, desperate fellows should enter this jail and liberate you, would you go with them?"

This was said in a whisper. The prisoner started to his feet and stared at him in amazement. The cool effrontery of the stranger stunned him. He

could hardly believe that any one would have the audacity to make such a proposition. After a moment he said:

"You are either what you pretend to be—a robber seeking recruits for your infamous band—or a detective, seeking to entrap me. In either case you are a contemptible scoundrel, and I command you to go. Leave me! I am innocent, and have determined to suffer as an innocent man rather than gain my liberty by disreputable means. I will talk no more with you, so go!"

"You may regret this," the tall stranger remarked, rising; and slouching his hat down over his face, he hurriedly left the jail. The jailer was standing on the outside waiting for him, and the man who had just interviewed Horace whispered:

"I was not able to work him."

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. GEORGE WEATHERBY ADVISED.

It was a forest stream, slow and silent, yet a clear, strong current, sweeping through the woods, silvered with sunshine. Maple trees, sycamores and oaks fringed the banks. A great bridge spanned the noiseless water—noiseless save when some member of the finny tribe took it into its head to kick up its heels and exhibit its silver scales in the sunlight. At the right of the bridge stood the old-fashioned Missouri plantation house of George Weatherby, which has been only partially described. It was such a building as half a century ago might have been seen all over the South. It was a two-story brick house, with narrow, old-fashioned windows, and half a dozen decaying negro cabins and outhouses surrounding it, though there were no negroes in the cabins now. Old plantation days in the South are gone forever. Mansion-house and cabins were guiltless of paint, but touched by Time's soft fingers into that dull, brownish gray that harmonizes with everything on the earth below and the heavens above—with the silver of the river, the green of the trees and the blue of the sky. The old mansion-house and modest little

cabins did not obtrude themselves, but simply nestled down, like an old partridge and her brood, at the foot of the hill, near the winding road leading to the bridge. Morning glories and ivy, with their wealth of rich green, purple and white, seemed striving to hide all about the house and cabins that was ugly.

Here Mr. George Weatherby had lived since he had emigrated from Virginia twenty years before. George Weatherby was called by his neighbors "close-fisted" and "miserly," but no one ever thought of him as being guilty of a dishonest act. He was said to be so straight-laced that he could not even forgive his nephew, who had been accused of purloining money from his employer.

"Aunt Becky," the wife, declared herself that she thought "George" was too harsh on Arthur, and that, after all, he might have been innocent.

This awoke Mr. Weatherby's wrath. His eyes flashed fire and the backbone of his nose rose several degrees higher while he glared at his wife furiously and replied:

"Call him innocent, d' ye? Why, jist look at th' way he spent money. Where did he git all that money t' frolic with, I'd like ter know, ef it warn't from Mark Hunt?"

As Aunt Becky was incapable of making any satisfactory answer, she held her peace. When the wanderer returned to the only home he had ever known and was turned away, as described in a former chapter, Aunt Becky sat in her bed-chamber weeping. She saw him, tired and hungry, go

down the path to the front gate, and had she not been intimidated by the wrath of her husband, would certainly have gone and brought him back. But she knew that George Weatherby was a man to be dreaded when in a rage; so she kept her room, silent tears alone testifying how her heart went out to Arthur.

Whatever motive her husband might have had in persecuting Arthur Westfall, Aunt Becky was no party to it.

No authentic information had been received from the wanderer since he left the neighborhood. It was rumored that he had been seen in the vicinity of Kansas City, and there was another report that he was on the Pacific coast, working on a sheep ranch; another said a young man answering his description had died in Denver. George Weatherby had once or twice expressed the belief that his nephew was with the road-agents at that time committing depredations in the West. No one believed it; nevertheless, the story was circulated. People have a strange way of repeating what their own judgment discredits, until a falsehood is believed to be a fact. This report was scattered so broadcast that the *Higbee Windmill* and *Wentzville Indicator* published long editorials in regard to certain rumors of a young man who had been discharged from a certain store for supposed crookedness in accounts, or, to speak more plainly, for too frequent visits to the money drawer of the merchant, had united his fortunes with banditti, and was now in the line of promotion to the gallows or penitentiary.

No one circulated these stories with more relish than Arthur's former fellow-clerk, Ab Nichols.

Mr. Hunt himself declared he put no reliance in the story, and that while there was strong circumstantial evidence that his former employee had taken money, he did not believe him naturally dishonest. It was more a misfortune than a fault.

Thus the opinions of the people stood on the afternoon in question. Mr. Weatherby had, like most slave owners in the South, suffered by the war. A good share of his wealth consisted in negroes, and those he lost. His large farm was heavily mortgaged. His horses, cows, sheep and hogs yielded little profit, owing to bad management, and his grasping nature sighed for a fortune. The old man had almost grown haggard of late. Anxiety and fear had nearly dethroned his reason, so that at times he talked strangely of vast fortunes almost within his grasp, but which he feared his missing nephew would snatch from him.

Aunt Becky once told the preacher, who was making his pastoral call, that her husband talked strangely in his sleep, and sometimes awoke with a shriek.

Mr. Weatherby was feeding his pigs, cattle and horses on the afternoon in question. It was rather early to begin feeding, most farmers thought, for pasturage was still good. But Weatherby had explained that he was getting all his stock ready for the early fall market, to sell all he possessed and return to Virginia.

He stood by the pig-pen watching those voracious animals devour their corn, while he was mentally calculating how soon they would be ready for the market. The sound of wheels fell on his ears, and glancing down the road, he saw a carriage coming across a long bridge and drive up toward his house. It was a vehicle belonging to a livery stable in the nearest town. The driver drew rein at the gate, and said:

"Here you are!"

A professional-looking gentleman alighted, and Mr. Weatherby hastened toward him. He had small, black, cunning eyes, a smooth, shaven face and narrow forehead. His features expressed keen unscrupulousness, though his manner was affable and pleasant.

"What is your bill?" he asked the driver.

"Two dollars."

"Come for me to-morrow," he added, handing the driver the money.

"Gosh! Talks az ef he wuz goin' t' put up with me t'-night," said Mr. Weatherby. "Howdy?" he added, on reaching the gate where the stranger stood, a small travelling-bag in his hand.

"Is this Mr. George Weatherby?" he asked.

"Yes."

Taking his hand, the newcomer said:

"You are the man I came to see. I am Allen Cravensford."

'Th' lawyer?"

"Yes."

"Frum Virginia?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why, yer th' man I writ to!"

"Yes, but we will talk about that when alone. Doesn't your wife know of this?"

"No."

"Nor any of the other members of the family?"

"No. I keep my business t' myself."

"That is wise."

"Now come in."

Aunt Becky, who had just milked, and was busy "doing up her night work," came in, wondering who had come to see them.

"Becky, this is Mr. Cravensford, from Virginia."

"La, massy sakes alive! he's a long way frum home!"

"He's goin' t' stay all night, so hev supper ready soon as you kin, an' tell th' gal t' fix up th' spare room for him to-night."

After supper was over the farmer and his guest went into the sitting-room, where they could be alone, and closed the door. The autumn evenings were growing cool, and a bright fire was blazing in the broad, dark-throated fireplace. The farmer lighted a pipe and the lawyer a cigar, and both smoked in silence. At last the lawyer said:

"Why didn't you answer my last letter?"

"I answered every letter I got."

"But the one in which I accepted your offer to help you out?"

"Didn't git no sich letter."

"You didn't?"

"No; I swear I didn't."

The lawyer started up, threw the stump of his cigar in the fire and said:

"Then we are in a devil of a fix."

"Why?"

"The letter was lost."

"Well, what 'f et wuz?"

"It may be found; and it tells the whole story about your nephew and the half million—"

It was George Weatherby's turn to leap to his feet in astonishment. He did it so suddely that he dropped his clay pipe, which was dashed to pieces on the stone hearth.

"What did ye lose that letter fur?" he gasped, looking as if he could tear the lawyer to pieces.

"I did not lose it. I mailed it to you, registered it, and supposed no other eyes save yours would see it."

"When war it writ?"

The lawyer gave him the date of the letter, and the old man said:

"Why, it ort to a-been here three weeks ago."

"Of course."

"Then it 's lost."

"If it should never be found, I would not care," said the lawyer. "But if it should be found, then there would be trouble for both of us. Where is this Arthur Westfall?"

"Nobody can tell, for nobody knows," returned the farmer. "Some say he went West, some say he is dead, an' some believe he j'ined the train-robbers."

"If either of the two last reports is true, we are

safe. But if he is living out West, he may hear of this some time, and make us trouble. The best thing you can do is to go to Virginia as soon as possible, get control of that fortune and disappear."

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. WELLS'S MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

We should perhaps ask the reader's pardon for so often shifting the scenes of our story, but there are so many threads in the warp and woof of this romance that, like the weaver, we are compelled to drop one shuttle and pick up another. We ask the reader to accompany us to the store of Mr. Jordan Wells in Wellsville.

Mr. Wells was the old type of a cruel father who has been so often drawn by the novelist, but is not half so bad a parent as he is represented. He was looking after the welfare of his child. Her happiness was the main thought in his mind, and he knew enough of this sordid world to know that happiness and poverty are incompatible. As soon as he discovered that there was danger of Horace Rathburne, his penniless clerk, winning his daughter's heart, he took measures to stop proceedings

at once; for while Horace was honorable, he was under the curse of poverty. Mr. Wells had reached that age when "the heyday in the blood is tame and waits on judgment," and wished to conform his daughter's ideas of love to his judgment. He looked on the son of a wealthy merchant named Hunt, of another town, as a suitable match for Flora, for the uniting of the two great commercial houses of Wells and Hunt would have been a power in Missouri. Josiah Hunt was, in the eyes of Mr. Wells, a model young man. He was well educated, not bad-looking, and what was worth all other accomplishments, was an excellent salesman. But Josiah was so engrossed in business that he neglected to start in soon enough to win the heart of Miss Wells, and before he was quite ready the clerk in her father's store, Horace Rathburne, had already succeeded.

When he learned of Horace's arrest on the charge of the bank robbery, he very naturally supposed that would put an end to the affections of the beauty of Wellsville, and determined not to let any one get ahead of him again; so two or three days after Mr. Wells's visit to his daughter, Josiah left his father's store in Huntsville and took the train for Wellsville. He found the merchant in his store, which was very favorable to Josiah, for he was never so much at home as when he was in a mercantile house, surrounded by cash-boys and clerks. He was so thoroughly absorbed in business that he had neglected to take the scissors from his vest-pocket or the pencil from behind his ear, and as he

sat in the merchant's private office he could hardly refrain from rapping on the desk and calling for some imaginary cash-boy.

When the merchant entered with a hearty "How are you, Josiah!" he intuitively touched his scissors, as if about to respond: "Yes, sir; very cheap and fast colors! How many yards, please?" But he checked his habit, and answered more properly and appropriately:

"Pretty well, thank you; I hope I find you the same?"

"How is your father?"

"Well."

"Is he going to Chicago or New York to lay in his winter stock?"

"He believes he will go to New York."

"How has your fall trade opened?"

"Very fair."

Then for some time their conversation ran on in the commonplace line, Mr. Hunt, junior, all the while trying to get on the track of what he had come to say. He got at it in a blunt, business-sort of a way:

"I just thought, Mr. Wells, I would run over and see—see if we could—that is, I mean I wanted to ask you where Miss Flora is?"

Mr. Wells cleared his throat, and in a voice somewhat husky, answered:

"She is with her uncle at a place, or where a place used to be, called Newburg. Her uncle, Reuben Price, has an old-fashioned tavern there, where the hunters usually stop during the fall."

"How long will she remain?"

"I cannot say. She may stop all winter."

"Let me see; what station is nearest?"

"Rushville."

"Well now, Mr. Wells, you have known our house for a long time, and know we have always been able to discount our bills; would you have any objection to my calling on your daughter?"

The merchant, after a moment's silence, answered:

"No, I reckon not."

"Even if that visit might be with an object to matrimony?"

"No."

That point settled, those practical business men once more returned to mercantile matters. On taking his leave Mr. Hunt, junior, said that as soon as they had completed their fall invoice and added their new stock he would go to Newburg. He regarded the matter as completely settled as if he had purchased a thousand dollars' worth of goods on thirty days' time.

Mr. Wells wished the young man success, but he knew his daughter too well to build much hope on the wooing of Mr. Hunt, junior. Flora would not be wooed in such a business fashion, and, besides, he feared that Horace already had too strong a hold on her affections for Hunt to have any show.

Three days after the visit of Mr. Hunt, junior, a tall, finely formed gentleman, whose boots, spurs, broad-brimmed sombrero and riding-whip gave him a cavalier-like appearance, entered the store and

inquired for Mr. Wells. His eyes were steel-blue, his dark-brown beard closely trimmed, and his face had about it something attractive. He was shown to the desk of the merchant, who sat next the cashier, where he could overlook the entire store.

"When can I see you alone for a short time?" asked the stranger, removing his broad-brimmed hat.

"When we close up."

"What hour do you close?"

"At seven."

"Do you then go home?"

"Certainly."

"I will be there at eight."

"Yes, sir."

The tall cavalier-like stranger walked away, his spurs jingling at his boot-heels as he went. Mr. Wells glanced after him a moment, and then, turning to his cashier, said:

"Do you know him, Lizzie?"

"No, sir."

"Has he ever been in the store before?"

"I have never seen him."

"I must say that he is the coolest person I have met lately."

But when Mr. Wells reached home the business vexations and annoyances of the day had almost driven from his mind his prospective visitor. Having finished his dinner, he went to the study to smoke a cigar and glance over the evening paper. The door-bell rang, and a moment later a servant said there was a gentleman to see him.

"Show him in," returned the merchant, now remembering his promised visitor. In a few moments the cavalier-looking stranger was admitted to his presence.

"Well, sir, what is your business?" asked the merchant.

"I am here on an errand of mercy," said the cavalier, seating himself in a chair, with his back to the wall facing the door on his left, so he could see any one that might enter.

"Errand of mercy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, if you want charity, I—"

"You do not understand me, sir. I am not a beggar," and there was an expression of pride in the manner of the young cavalier.

"Well, sir, what the deuce do you mean?" asked the merchant.

"When you hear what I have to say, sir, you may think that I am meddling with what does not concern me; but if you remember the answer of Cain when asked where his brother Abel was, you might conclude, after all, we are our brother's keeper."

"Well, sir, go on; say what you have to say, and be done with it."

"I believe you are a man who wants to do what is right, and that you wish no innocent man harm."

"I don't."

"A young man named Horace Rathburne once clerked in your store?"

"Yes—he is in jail."

"I know that—but how did he get there?"

"The sheriff put him there."

"But for what?"

"For what? Why, hang it, robbery man. Haven't you heard the story?"

"Yes, and I have heard more than is generally told."

"What do you know about it?"

"I know the young man is innocent."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it?"

"Now don't ask me how, because I am not at liberty to tell, but I swear to you he is innocent."

"Then why wasn't he proven such at the preliminary examination?"

"Because he has been caught by some infernal, relentless circumstances, which seem determined to drag him down to ruin."

"If you know he is innocent, can't you prove it?"

"No, sir. There are some things which we positively know, yet can't prove. Now, Mr. Wells, this young man was for a long time in your employ, was he not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was he faithful?"

"He was."

"Sober?"

"Yes."

"Industrious?"

"Very."

"Honest?"

"Yes, all of that."

"Did you ever hear him accused of any offense before the Standish bank robbery?"

"No."

"Now, my dear sir, you, who are an intelligent, reading man, should know that a man who begins a criminal career don't begin as high up in the scale as bank robbery, but with some petty offense, until he gets his hand in."

"Two men, who cannot be impeached, swear positively that he is the criminal."

"It is a case of mistaken identity. If you knew positively that this young man was innocent, would you still have him convicted, because he loved your daughter, something, perhaps, he could not help?"

"My daughter is not to be considered in the matter at all, sir. If I knew he was innocent, I would spend my last dollar to prove him so, or I would do the same with any one else I knew to be innocent. But he is not innocent. There is the evidence of a dozen of the best men in Standish to convict him."

The cavalier slowly rose, and donning his broad-brimmed sombrero, took a step nearer to the merchant, and bending over him, pointed his long forefinger almost in his face, and in a low, solemn voice, said:

"Horace Rathburne is innocent of the crime of which he is accused, sir; I swear it!" and turning abruptly on his heel, left the house. As soon as the astonished merchant could recover himself he went out to look for him, but he was nowhere to be seen,

CHAPTER XXIII.

A TRAGEDY ON THE ROAD.

The tall, cavalier-like stranger, on leaving the home of the merchant, went to a livery barn and said to a stable boy:

"Get my horse!"

While the boy was saddling his horse he stepped to the office and paid the clerk. When the horse was saddled he mounted and rode to the suburbs of the town, where stood a public house, patronized by people coming and going. The public house had a lunch counter, a bar and a restaurant.

Fastening his horse to the hitch-rack, the stranger entered and seated himself at one of the small tables and ordered a cup of coffee and a steak. No one belonging to the restaurant had ever seen him before, but there was a man at another table who occasionally gave him a curious glance.

The cavalier's back was to the wall, his face toward the door, and the man who seemed interested in him sat on the opposite side of the room. There is something spiritual about a stare. We may not see the person looking at us, but we somehow become cognizant of the fact.

The waiter brought the newcomer his steak and coffee and asked:

"Will you have anything more?"

"No."

Glancing at the spurs on his heels, he asked:

"Are you goin' to ride?"

With an impatient frown, the cavalier answered:

"Yes."

He finished his steak and coffee in silence. Once only he raised his face and met the impudent stare of the stranger opposite. The man's eyes drooped beneath his own, and the horseman finished his meal while the inquisitive stranger sipped his beer and ate his toast in silence. Having finished his supper, the cavalier went to the cashier's desk and paid for his meal.

"Are you buying cattle?" asked the proprietor, with the polite inquisitiveness of a Missourian interested in the welfare of his friends.

"Yes."

"I hope you will come again."

Without any response, the horseman left the restaurant, while the eyes of the inquisitive stranger at the other table followed him. Mounting his horse, Mr. Wells's visitor galloped down the road.

"Do you know that man?"

The cashier looked up from the pile of bills he was counting. It was the inquisitive stranger.

"Who?" the cashier asked.

"The man with spurs and riding whip, who just left."

"No."

"Was he ever here before?"

"No."

"Did you learn his name?"

"I don't ask people their names when they come to the house."

A baffled look came over the face of the inquisitive man, but he had not given up yet.

"You evidently have no suspicion who that man is?"

"No."

"Can you procure a saddle-horse for me at once?"

"I don't keep a livery stable."

"But you can send a boy for one. Let him go to Barnes & Miller and give him this note; they know me there."

The inquisitive man hastily pencilled a note as he spoke. The proprietor looked at him in amazement and wanted to know why he did not go and do it himself. The man, folding the note, said:

"I must run across to the station and send a telegram ahead. Here is a dollar for the boy who carries the note and brings the horse," and he was gone.

"Here, Charley," called the cashier, who was also proprietor. "Take this note to Barnes & Miller and bring back the hoss. That feller seems in a blamed hurry all at once."

As the inquisitive stranger was hurrying to the telegraph station, he muttered:

"There is no mistake this time. I thought before he left I knew him, now I know it. Wish I had

stopped him there. It would have caused a scene, but it would have ended matters then and there. Never mind, I will get him yet."

Reaching the telegraph station, he sent dispatches flying in every direction, describing the horseman, and calling on the officials of the State to stop him. Having done this, he hurried back to the public house, which he reached just as Charles arrived with the horse.

"Where are ye goin' so sudden?" asked the cashier, as he vaulted into the saddle.

"Not far, I hope," and without another word he galloped away.

"Wall, I be dinged if there ain't more queer things a happenin' in the world 'n I ever heerd on," said the proprietor, as he watched the long line of smoke-like dust trailing after the flying stranger. Turning to the boy who brought the horse, he asked: "Charley, who is that fellow?"

"His name is Bolls."

"Where does he live?"

"Some un sed he wuz from Chicago."

"What's he a-doing here?"

"Dun know."

"I 've seen that feller a-loafin' around fur a week. Bet he 's a sharper a-tryin' t' skin some un."

The first horseman who had left the town rode at a brisk canter until he was half a mile from the corporate limits of the city, and then, putting his horse to a gallop, kept him at that pace until the animal was in a lather-sweat. Drawing him up to a slower gait, he said:

"He eyed me rather inquisitively. I am not at all pleased with his manner."

He placed his right hand under his coat and drew something around until it was nearly in front of his body. This act seemed habitual with him, for he repeated it several times in the next half hour. At the end of that time he heard the tramp of a horse's hoofs coming down the road in his rear. Again the right hand went under his coat, but only for a moment. The horseman following seemed a peaceful enough citizen, though he was riding quite briskly.

The man he was pursuing showed no disposition to evade him, but cast furtive glances behind as he drew nearer. The road they were travelling led through a dense forest, and there was not a house within two miles of the point where the last horseman overtook the first. The sky was cloudless, but the moon had not yet risen, and the pale light from the stars could not penetrate the solemn depths of that old wood. Crickets chirped from the decayed logs; the noise of the peaceful night issued from the woods. The birds had long since retired to their leafy branches, and only the rustle of the leaves, stirred by some prowler, disturbed the quiet of nature. The night was cool and pleasant.

The horseman whom we have called the cavalier was in a low portion of the country, with the tall trees on every side tossing their giant branches against a starry sky. The echoes of the hoofs of his pursuer's steed drew nearer and nearer. He drew his horse to one side of the road, as if to let the coming horseman pass.

He came up, slackened his pace, and said:

"Good evening, stranger."

"Good evening, sir," was the response, in a low, husky voice.

"How far are you going?"

"Some distance."

"Are you well acquainted in this part of the country?"

"No."

"Did I not see you back in the town we just left?"

"I don't know."

In the darkness that enveloped them, the cavalier was enabled to put his hand under his coat without his companion seeing him.

"But you were there?"

"In town?"

"Yes."

"I was."

"Thought I had seen you."

"Well, sir," in a deep, husky voice, "what if you did?"

"Oh, nothing; you were in Blake's restaurant?"

"I left it sober."

The man who had just overtaken him, though repulsed at every point, continued, undaunted, to ply him with questions.

"Do you live far from here?" he asked.

"Some miles."

"Are you going home to-night?"

"No."

"Where do you expect to stop?"

"I don't know."

"I believe I have seen you before to-day."

"Perhaps; but I don't recall the time."

"It was in a railway train."

"I sometimes travel by rail; you might have met me."

Then they rode for some time in silence. The night was too dark for them to see each other's features, although they continually cast furtive glances at each other.

"You have not been long in this part of the State?"

"I reached Wellsville to-day."

"I saw you at Mr. Wells's store."

"I had business of a private nature with the merchant."

"You look very much like a man for whom I have long been watching."

The cavalier-like traveller pushed back his broad-brimmed hat, and giving his companion a bold glance, answered:

"Now that you have found me, what are you going to do about it? What can it be to you who I am, where I live, or whither I am going? As you seem in a greater hurry than I, ride on."

As he spoke he pulled his horse to the side of the road and stopped. Not many rods ahead of them was a broad stream, spanned by a strong bridge, with great, arched arms on each side supporting timbers. They had reached a bit of rising ground above the bridge, when the horseman drew rein and ordered his companion to pass on.

"You seem tired of my company."

"Pass on, if you please," said the cavalier, "I will wait here until you have crossed the bridge."

The moon was just rising, and the pale, silver rays began to cast a cold, gray light through the almost denuded trees. But its light was not yet strong enough to show the expressions of anger on the faces of the travellers, who had come to a halt, facing each other so closely together that their horses' heads almost touched.

"I am not going to cross the bridge," answered the man who had followed the cavalier.

"Then turn about and go the other way."

To this the man whom the boy called Bolls replied:

"Yes, I will go back; but you shall accompany me."

"I?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you are my prisoner."

For a single instant the two men sat in their saddles gazing at each other. The cavalier had his back to the east, holding the reins lightly in his left hand, while he kept his right at his side.

"Your prisoner! Are you mad?" he asked.

"No. Don't flatter yourself you can deceive me. I arrest you in the name of the State, so just hold out your hands for these bracelets!" taking from his coat-pocket a pair of handcuffs.

He touched the flank of his horse with his heel, and the animal took a step forward. The cavalier

suddenly raised his right arm to a level with the face of his would-be captor. There was a blinding flash, a stunning report shook the air, both horses leaped aside, and Bolls, who for an instant sat bolt upright staring at his murderer, dropped from the saddle into the road. His frightened steed, freed from its rider, went thundering away toward Wellsville, and stopped not in his flight until he reached the barn of his master.

The man who had fired the shot quieted his own steed by a word and rode up to the side of the man he had slain. The moon rose higher, and through the tree-tops the pale rays streamed down on the ghastly object lying there in the road. There was a round hole in the centre of the forehead, from which the dark life-current trickled and moistened the dust by his side. His hat, all covered with dust, had rolled a foot or two away.

"Another fool has tried it and lost. How many more will make the attempt?" the mysterious stranger muttered; and turning his horse's head toward the bridge, he crossed it and galloped away.

The moon rose higher and looked down on the dead man, whose hair was moistened by the dew; the noble stream ran on its winding course; the leaves quivered and rustled in the night air. A timid hare hopped out into the road, gazed on the object a moment, went all around it to reconnoiter, and even came near enough to sniff it, then, as if appalled, turned and scampered off into the woods; and the dead man lay there in the dusty road, with his glassy eyes and rigid face turned to the sky.

CHAPTER XXIV.

UNCLE REUBEN MYSTIFIED.

There stood at the side of the road, twenty miles from Wellsville, a small frame house. There is something quaint, odd and primeval about most Missouri farmhouses, each seeming to be a distinct class of architecture by itself.

This house stood on a hill, was surrounded by a fence made of small poles nailed to stakes driven in the ground. A few hazel bushes and some scrub oaks, all browned by the early frost and gray in the dust, were in the front yard and came up to the fence on the outside. A slender field of very poor corn glided back from the house to the bottomland below. The first story of the house was made of logs, then it was topped out half a story higher with very rough boards, having a steep, sharp roof and a window in each gable end.

It was a small, plain house, the white mortar which filled the cracks contrasting with the bare, brown logs. There was nothing picturesque or attractive about this house. At the rear were some long corn cribs and a pole stable and shed, adding to the miserable appearance of the whole scene. Scorched by the suns of summer, swept by the

piercing blasts of winter, it was such a place where misery might be supposed to reign.

If it was unpleasant to look upon by daylight, how much more might it be at night, with its rough gable, without ornament or paint, rising in the moonlight above the hazels and low scrub oaks. The dead grass and brown hazels in the yard were covered with a cold dew, and the shivering air seemed to pierce one through.

The horseman who had slain his would-be captor by the bridge galloped up the hill to the broken gate and dismounted A dog, which lay in the front yard, started up and barked. Tying his horse to a post, the horseman advanced toward the door. The dog started from his bed under the scrub oak, barked furiously and showed his teeth.

"Be quiet, sir, be quiet!" said the man.

The dog at sound of his voice and bold manner retreated a few paces, but continued to growl. The homicide went to the door and rapped on it with his knuckle. There was no sound at first. He rapped again louder than before, and some one was heard stirring within, and a moment later a voice said:

"Who 's there?"

"Fred, Fred, open the door!"

"I don't know ye."

"You will as soon as you see me."

There was a sound of a key turning in a lock, the door opened just a little, and he caught the glimpse of a man in his night-clothes.

"Fred, don't you know me?" the newcomer asked.

"Why, yes, it 's—"

"Don't call names. Say, can I depend on you for a while?"

"Forever!"

"Fred, we fought for a common cause side by side, fought and lost—"

"Yes, it warn't our fault, though. Ye saved my life at th' risk o' yer own, an' hev a bullet mark in yer breast fur doin' it. Now, ef yer in trouble, call on me."

"I want to stay forty-eight hours in your attic, with no one save you knowing I am there."

"Ye kin."

"Is your wife awake?"

"Yes, but Polly will keep the secret."

"And the children?"

"All asleep."

"Don't let them know I am here."

The horse was put in the log stable, the saddle, bridle and accoutrements concealed, and for forty-eight hours the cavalier took up his abode in the attic, while the local officials were scouring the country everywhere to find the slayer of Bolls, the Chicago detective.

* * * * * *

When Uncle Reuben Price got his weekly mail from Rushville, he lit his pipe and sat down to read the news.

"There 's been a murder, Rachel," said the old man, without taking his eyes off the paragraph.

"Why, who 's been killed, Rube?"

"A man named Bolls; found lyin' in th' road

with a bullet-hole in his head, close to Grand River Bridge."

"Bolls? I don't know any one named Bolls."

"He was from Chicago, an' is supposed to be one o' Pinkerton's detectives."

"Who killed him?"

"That 's what they 'd like t' find out. S'posed he come to Missouri t' catch some o' the bank an' train robbers, an' wuz tryin' t' do it."

"Well, for massa sakes! Don't it beat all!"

Uncle Reuben thought so, too, though he did not say so. At tea time Aunt Rachel told what Uncle Reuben had read in the papers, and Mrs. Howard turned deathly pale, while Flora, who was growing thinner every day, listened calmly to the account which Uncle Reuben read from the paper. After tea she returned to her room, and sat before the fire which Cater had built, her mind not on the terrible story she had heard, but on her unfortunate lover. There came a light tap at her door. She opened it and saw Mrs. Howard, pale and trembling, standing on the threshold, a light shawl thrown about her shoulders.

"I have just put the children to bed, and thought I would come and sit with you awhile."

"Come in, Mrs. Howard; I am always glad to have you. There are so few who can sympathize with me."

"Dear child," said the lady, drawing her head to her breast and kissing her pretty cheek; "your grief is great, but it could be worse."

"How could it be worse?"

"If Horace was guilty."

Flora sank into a chair and covered her face with her hand.

"All the world has turned against him, Mrs. Howard, and yet I love him. I cannot help it. He is innocent, and I know it."

"I know it also." Then for a long time the lady sat gazing into the fire. At last, without raising her eyes, she remarked: "It was terrible, the killing of the detective by the bridge."

Flora now recalled the story Uncle Reuben had read at tea, and said:

"I suppose some one he had tried to capture did it. It is an awful thing to take human life."

"Perhaps, after all, the killing was in self-defense."

"No, it could not have been. The paper states that handcuffs were found near the dead officer, and it is supposed he was trying to arrest the man who shot him."

"But you forget, child, that an arrest with some men is equal to murder."

"No. They would have a fair trial."

"A fair trial to them would mean death. The man who shot Bolls knew it was his life or Bolls's life, and he slew him in self-defense. Had Bolls gone away and left him alone he would not have harmed him."

"Why, Mrs. Howard, how do you know?"

"I don't know."

Then rising, she excused herself and went to her room.

Next day three strangers with guns and dogs came to the Newburg tavern. One of them accosted the proprietor with:

"Is this Mr. Reuben Price?"

Uncle Reuben, who stood on his porch, his pipe in one hand and the other thrust into his trousers pocket for tobacco, answered:

"Yes, sir."

"We are hunters, Mr. Price. We heard that deer were plenty in this part of the country."

"Reckin they air. I don't never hunt none, but hunters come here nearly every fall."

"Can you board us for a few days?"

"I reckin so."

"And our horses?"

"Hev ye got hosses?"

"Yes. They will be here to-morrow."

Uncle Reuben thought he could, and called Cater to take in the luggage. The happy old negro grinned as he took their hand-bags, guns and ammunition up-stairs, saying:

"Bet dey find dat Newburg am a big town yit."

The wagon which had brought the three men from Rushville returned, and the three hunters, who gave their names as Park, Jones and Mullins, went up to their rooms and closed the door, and were not seen until the dinner-bell rang.

Mrs. Howard complained of headache and did not come to dinner. Flora was also indisposed, and the three newcomers were all who sat at the table. After dinner one of the strangers sauntered on the porch, where Uncle Reuben was sitting, and asked:

"Have you been here long?"

"Yes," was the answer.

"Do you have many customers?"

"When th' huntin' season commences we hev a good many, but it's a little airly yit."

"Are we your only guests?"

"No; there's my niece upstairs, an' Missus Howard an' her children."

"Mrs. Howard!"

"Yes."

"Has she been here long?"

"Over a month."

"Where is she from?"

"Don't know."

"A widow?"

"No, she 's got a man."

"Where is he?"

"Don't know."

"Does he ever come here?"

"Oh, yes, he comes right often. Hain't been here fur several days now. I think he 's buyin' cattle ur land ur somethin'. I never meddle with other people's business."

"What kind of a looking man is he? He may be an old friend of mine."

Uncle Reuben proceeded in his way to describe Mr. Howard, and the hunter thought that possibly it might be his friend. He would be glad to meet him when he came, anyway.

The horses came that day, and the next two of of the men went into the woods with dogs and guns, while the third, Mr. Park, remained at

the house. The hunters came back empty-handed.

While Cater was feeding the horses, Mr. Mullins, who tarried at the barn, asked:

"Do you know Mr. Howard, Cater?"

"Yes, sah."

"What kind of a man is he?"

"Golly, him am a good man. Him am splendid, sah!"

"Does he come to this tavern often?"

"Not berry."

"What time does he come?"

"Mostly when he wants ter," returned Cater, with a grin. "Den skips off same way."

"Why does he do that, Cater?"

"Dun know, boss. Seems like er mighty fine man. Gives me lots o' money fur keerin' fur his hoss. Ef I only feed 'im and rub 'im down, till the ha'r all dry, give dis chile two dollars. I tell ye he am a mighty fine man."

"And Mrs. Howard?"

"She am a mighty nice woman, too. Gives Cater money for carryin' wood up ter her room an' pays Aunt Aggy fur takin' keer ob de chillun."

"So you think they are real good people?"

"'Deed I do, boss—I know et." Cater had a strong suspicion that the man was trying to "pump" him, and determined that he should gain nothing by it. If he had any suspicions in regard to Mr. Howard, he kept them from the new guests.

Every day two of the hunters went into the woods and one remained at the house. After the first evening Mrs. Howard met them at the table. Aunt Rachel introduced her to the new guests, and she talked without reserve on all the topics of the day, displaying unusual intelligence. Her conversation was a puzzle to the gentlemen, and they were heard discussing her in their room, heard by the lady herself, who had her ear to the keyhole of their door.

When the new guests had been at the house two or three days, Cater went to Uncle Reuben and said:

"Unc' Reuben, dem fellahs ain't no hunters at all. Lem me tell you dem fellahs ain't no hunters."

"How do you know, Cater?"

"Why, never bring no game. Don't hab no kind ob guns ter kill deah. Got dem Winchesters and resolvers and all dem things. Dey ain't hunters."

Uncle Reuben, who never tried to solve problems or unravel mysteries, refilled his pipe and smoked in silence.

Next afternoon, just as the sun was setting beyond those Western hills, blue with the smoke-like haze of Indian summer, a solitary horseman came slowly riding up the hill to the old tavern. He was a strange-looking person, with a Wild-Western air about him, resembling a herder of the plains. His small black eyes glanced warily about, reconnoitering as he advanced. He came to the little stiles in

front of the Newburg tavern, and drew rein as if to dismount. At this moment the door opened and one of the new guests stepped out on the porch. He saw the small man with dark eyes, sallow face, and black mustache, and, leaping into the yard, shouted:

"Halt! Surrender!"

Before the astounded stranger could wheel his horse to fly, the other two hunters, one with a revolver and the other with a Winchester rifle, ran into the yard. Uncle Reuben, who was sitting on the porch smoking, was filled with astonishment and seemed "grown fast to his chair," while the three deer-hunters shouted:

"Halt! Surrender! Don't move a step, or you die!"

The horseman who had just arrived threw himself on the ground, with his steed between him and those men in the yard, and from under the belly and neck of his horse came two flashes of fire and two sharp, quick reports. The man dropped the rifle, uttered a yell of pain and clapped his left hand to his shattered arm.

Bang! Bang! Bang! rang out shots in quick succession from the pistols of the other two. Their bullets crashed against the stiles and fence.

A scene of the wildest confusion ensued. Aunt Rachel fled around the house, stumbled, and fell into a washtub filled with dirty water, and came near being drowned. Aunt Aggy started for the spring-house, but was caught under the chin by her own clothes-line and brought down. Uncle Reuben

dropped his pipe and ran to the barn at a faster gait than he had travelled for years. Uncle Cater ran to the cellar, and, falling on his knees, began to pray:

"O Lawd, come down and help us! O deah Lawd, come down right now an' save? Come yerse'f, deah Lawd; don't send yo' Son dis time, foh I tell ye dis ain't no chile's play!"

Flora, hearing Mrs. Howard shrink when the firing first began, ran to her room, to find her in a dead faint, with her children clinging to her. She busied herself restoring the lady to consciousness, and really was the only cool person about the place.

All the while from under the neck and belly of his horse the sharp cracks of the stranger's pistol continued to ring on the air until he drove his would-be captors into the house, then, mounting, he galloped away, pursued by a shower of bullets from the infuriated guests of Uncle Reuben. The mystified landlord lay in the hayloft, yelling at the top of his voice for them to quit.

CHAPTER XXV.

ARTHUR AND GRACE.

Day by day Arthur Westfall found his position growing more and more unendurable. He began to realize that the wages of sin was death. Every kind look, every gentle word of General Hawley increased his misery. By close application to the bank books he strove to conceal his anguish of soul. But even those pages accused him. He never opened the books that he did not see the crime he was helping to conceal.

"Oh, Heaven!" he groaned when in his room. "What am I to do? How will all this end?"

Some pious person had placed a framed Scriptural quotation, worked in crimson and gold, over the door. No quotation more appropriate to his case could have been selected:

"He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble: I will deliver him and honor him."—Psalm XCI.; verse 15.

He gazed on those words as if the divine revelation was, like the handwriting on the wall at the feast of Belshazzar, sent for the occasion. Did the same promise extend to him? Was he not so far

gone but that he might be delivered and honored? He read that motto again and again a dozen times.

Arthur's religious training had not been neglected. Aunt Becky had always been a conscientious Christian woman, and did her share to make him a Christian youth. But his uncle's treatment, that false accusation, the locking of honest doors against him, had turned him against the world and against God. When he asked himself if he was not too far gone to be saved, he remembered that his pious old aunt had told him of One able to save even to the uttermost. He turned toward the corner, strongly inclined to kneel and pray; but no, not yet. How dared he, who was plotting to rob and, perhaps, murder, ask God for aid? How dared he approach the throne of grace, all polluted with sin as he was? Poor Arthur! he had a poor conception of Christ's teaching. He could not understand that his only way to get rid of sin was to go to Christ.

Next day General Hawley was not at the bank. Some one said he was slightly indisposed.

"He will be out in a day or two," Meeker declared in his low tones to the bookkeeper. When they were alone that day, Meeker asked:

"By the way, my friend George, have you heard anything about the State funds?"

"No."

"They are a deuced long time about bringing them. *Have you seen the chief since?*" This last sentence was uttered after having made a careful

inspection of the office to see that they were really alone.

"No."

Arthur answered in monosyllables when he could. In fact, he so detested the knave that he could hardly endure his presence.

"The chief has his eye on us, my boy. There is not a moment that he doesn't see and hear us, you can rest assured of that."

"Yes."

"Now, if we go astray, we may expect death."

Arthur merely nodded.

"We are too far in this to back out. You understand that?"

He merely gave him an inquiring glance, as much as to say:

"Do you contemplate backing out?"

"Now, George," said the cashier, laying the forefinger of his right hand across the palm of his left, "the most contemptible being living is a traitor. He is worse than a thief or a coward. He gains the friendship of men, who suppose him their friend, and then betrays them."

Arthur could with difficulty refrain from saying: "Such a traitor as you, who, for selfish ends, would ruin and, perhaps, murder his benefactor, is a poor teacher of morals and honor." He took care not to permit his thoughts to find utterance. Arthur had begun to hope that something might turn up to relieve him from this distressing situation. Somehow these words, "He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble;

I will deliver him and honor him," seemed to have personal significance. As soon as practicable he left the cashier, for he detested him and was in his society as little as possible.

Next day there came a note from General Hawley to the bookkeeper, asking him to call at the house and bring some papers which he wished to examine together with him. Arthur showed the note to Meeker, and said:

"I must go!"

"Certainly. Be very circumspect. Those papers have reference to the State funds, and it is possible you may learn something about them. Sound the old man, my boy, but be very shrewd. He is a cautious old coon, and will be easily put on his guard. Once rouse his suspicions and you will be fired, and the whole thing ruined. But you are a fellow of good address, modest demeanor, and shrewdness enough to carry you through."

Arthur bowed coldly, and, at the proper time, gathered up the bundle of papers to which the note had reference and went to the great house on the hill. It was a palatial residence, three full stories in height, a fine specimen of modern architecture, surrounded by well-laid-out grounds, adorned with all the beauties of the floral world which thrive in that mild climate. A beautiful fountain cast sparkling streams into the air, filling a large basin in which some pond lilies grew.

The heart of the new bookkeeper beat strangely as he approached the great front door and rang the bell. A servant appeared, and Arthur sent his

name to the banker, to whose presence he was at once admitted. The General was sitting in his great, comfortable arm-chair, looking a little paler than usual. He greeted the new bookkeeper with:

"How are you, George, my boy? Glad to see you looking so well. Be seated."

"Here are the papers," began Arthur.

"Oh, bother the papers. Lay them on the desk, and we will look them over after tea. How is everything going at the bank?"

"As usual."

"Of course it is. I knew it would. I tell you, my lad, Meeker is a fine fellow, and has a business head on him, too." Then changing the subject, he added: "I had a slight attack yesterday, but I will be out soon. I am getting like an old, worn-out horse, not good for much, and must trust to others. But with you and Meeker at the bank, I feel that everything will go right. By the way, do you find the books all straight?"

Clearing his throat, so as to gain time to collect his thoughts, Arthur answered:

"I have not been through them yet."

"Well, if there is anything about them which you don't understand, go to Meeker. He has the run of the business much better than I. I had hoped he would some day be a member of my family, and that our interests would be mutual; but"—with a sigh—"it is not to be. To divulge a family secret, I had hoped he would be my son-in-law; but Grace—my daughter—I believe, doesn't fancy him."

Arthur started despite himself, his cheek alternately flushing and paling; but, fortunately, the General's eyes were not on him. The bookkeeper thought he saw a new incentive to the villain's actions. Meeker was actuated by avarice and revenge. Arthur could not but secretly rejoice that Grace Hawley had rejected him, for financial ruin, even death, was preferable to union with such a man.

Before he could make any answer he heard a light footfall, and a voice that ever stirred his soul asked:

"Papa, will you have your tea now?"

"No, child. I am much better. Come in, Grace. This is Mr. Fowler, the new bookkeeper. You must excuse Grace, Mr. Fowler. She is an only child and is badly spoiled, as is the case with 'only children.' She has always been accustomed to bolting into her father's room at all times, without the formality of knocking or announcement."

Grace bowed. Arthur rose, blushed and bowed, muttering in his soft, even tones:

"I believe I saw you the other day, Miss Hawley, at the bank."

"Yes, sir, I did call for papa. Were you ever before in Starkeville, Mr. Fowler?" she asked.

"No."

"Then you are quite a stranger."

"I know no one save the bank officers and the few people whom I have met at the hotel."

"You must be very lonesome."

General Hawley, who had just received the after-

noon paper, and probably wished to be alone for a while, said:

"Yes, Grace, of course he is a stranger—a perfect stranger. Make him feel at home. Show him to the conservatory, the garden, the picture gallery; then go to the parlor, and sing and play for him until supper-time, while I look over the paper."

Arthur was thunderstruck with the whole-souled hospitality of the Missourian, but recollecting the object of his visit, with many blushes and stammers, said:

"But the papers—"

"Oh, hang the papers! We will attend to them after tea. Work! Work! I never saw such a man. Take him away, Grace, or he will be worked to death, and then the bank will be guilty of homicide." With this he snatched up his paper and turned toward the window, and Grace, with a winsome smile, which displayed her white, even teeth, took his arm, saying:

"Papa is accustomed to being obeyed."

They went. His head was in a whirl, and his heart beat as it never had before. Ere he knew it, this fairy creature had him in the flower garden, and was showing him the beauties of the floral world, praising their fragrance and beauty. Arthur, who was passionately fond of flowers, was delighted. He soon forgot the dark plot, the dark past, and lived only in the present. Her free manner put him quite at ease, and he found himself talking on all subjects in which Miss Hawley was most interested.

They found themselves in the parlor, where she played and sang for him, and then they talked of poetry and the latest novel, which he had not read, but of which she gave him a brief synopsis. It was about a poor young man, who, in ill-fortune, was abandoned by his friends, and in an evil moment united himself with a band of burglars. The story was so like his own that he almost fancied she was telling him a part of his own life.

"Do you know, Mr. Fowler," she said, "that your voice seems strangely familiar to me?"

At first he could hardly convince himself that he was not recognized. While his face was masked on that night the train was robbed, he had taken no precaution to disguise his voice. He did not venture to speak at once, but in a few seconds, having gained control of himself, he answered:

"You have no doubt heard a similar voice, Miss Hawley, but I don't believe you ever saw me before."

"Perhaps not, but your voice recalls something in the past. I must have heard it in a dream. Do you believe in dreams?"

"I cannot say I do. I have read and heard of dreams being strangely fulfilled, but never had any such experience."

"Nor I. Yet many times in everyday life something will recall a long-forgotten or dimly remembered dream, just as your voice reminds me of something in the past. I can't remember how it is connected with my dream, but it is strangely familiar."

"Miss Hawley, if my voice has been heard in your dreams, I sincerely hope it may long linger among your waking memories."

"Oh, don't grow poetical!" she broke in, with a laugh. "Do you enjoy the theatre?"

"Very much. My opportunities of witnessing the best talent the stage produces have been somewhat limited."

"They always are in small towns like this, but we make up theatre parties when there is any extra attraction in St. Louis or Chicago. Now as soon as you get through with the rush in those horrid books, you will go with us, won't you?" she asked, with the earnestness of a child trying to persuade an older brother. Go? Of course he would go, and was quite profuse in his thanks for the invitation.

"If the business at the bank will permit," he added, cautiously.

"Surely you can take a day off. We start one noon and are back the next. We charter our car, and none but our party are allowed to go in it. I am very fond of the opera, and we have promise of the Italian *prima donna* at St. Louis early this season. We must not miss that."

He also was passionately fond of the opera, and would be delighted to go. The tea-bell rang, and she hurried him to the dining-room. There he met the mother, a sweet, mild old lady of that noble, intelligent class of females who make American homes happy. Arthur was made to feel welcome, and astonished himself by laughing and chatting, just as anybody else would have done.

After tea, Grace assisted him to look over the papers, and he made some explanations to the banker, then chess was proposed, and a very enjoyable evening was spent.

Arthur left, head over heels in love, and when he awoke to the awful reality of his situation, he was almost insane.

"God deliver me! What am I doing?" he groaned.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MEEKER POINTS OUT ARTHUR'S DANGER.

Those peaceful, drowsy days of Indian Summer seemed never to have an end. The blue hills of the West, the hazy sky, the soft, balmy air, were productive of that delightful *ennui* called laziness. The birds were still among the trees, the flowers still bloomed, and summer seemed loth to leave such a delightful spot.

Arthur Westfall, who took early walks about the fields, was thrilled by the plowboy's whistle. He heard the mechanic laughing and jesting at his work, and often thought:

"How happy his lot, how miserable mine!"

The morning after his visit to the Hawley mansion he was at his place at business hours. His shoes were gray with the dust of the morning walk, and he paused at a bootblack's stand on the sidewalk to have them cleaned, then hastened to his desk. Early as he was, Meeker was before him. He nodded and smiled familiarly to Arthur, but as two clerks were within ear-shot he said nothing.

The day dragged slowly on. Business cares absorbed the attention of all connected with the establishment. General Hawley did not come to the bank that day, and when all had gone from the building after business hours, save Meeker and Arthur, the cashier went to the side of the bookkeeper and asked:

"How was the old man last night?"

"Improving."

"Did you talk much with him?"

"Yes."

"About the State funds?"

"Some."

"What did he say?"

"They will come soon."

"Soon—how soon?"

"He doesn't know."

"The chief is getting impatient."

"You have seen him?" asked Arthur, turning deathly pale.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last night."

"What did he say?"

"Says he wants the State funds."

"But they are not here."

"I know it."

Meeker frowned, turned away and muttered some unintelligible words at the delay. After a few moments he turned to Arthur, and in a low voice asked:

"Do you know he is growing suspicious?"

"The chief?"

"Yes."

"Of whom is he suspicious?"

"Everybody."

Arthur gave him a stare, and he continued:

"He seems to think that Hawley has got onto the secret, and will not bring the State funds to the bank."

"It is impossible for General Hawley to have any suspicions yet."

"He did not try to pump you, did he?"

"No."

"Did he mention me?"

"He spoke of you in the highest terms."

The cashier was flattered, and smiled wickedly as he said:

"Aye, my boy, if he knew all he would have an exalted opinion of me."

Arthur dared not attempt to reply. He closed the books and, rising, said he must go to his room.

"Are you not anxious to know what the chief said?" asked Meeker.

"Did he say anything of me?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Said he hoped you would make no blunder in this."

"Have I ever blundered?"

"No, but you are young and inexperienced."

"If he doubts me, let him remove me."

"No, no. You don't understand me. There is no doubting at all. Yet you have not had a great deal of experience, you understand, and there might come things which you could not understand."

"In that case, I have you and the chief to refer to for instructions."

"Certainly."

Arthur got away as soon as he could, and as he went to his room he thought:

"I believe the rascal begins to fear I am an honest man."

The sun had not yet set, and Arthur, armed with a stout stick, decided to take a walk down the long road which led from the town, and cross the bridge spanning the stream and across the hill beyond. His brain seemed on fire, and he walked rapidly, as if trying to run away from himself. The good-night songs of the birds were unheard, for his soul was too full of agony to drink in the sweet melodies of nature. No member of that band of cutthroats with whom cruel fate had linked his fortunes was so wholly repulsive to him as Calvin Meeker. They, like himself, might have been driven to desperation by personal wrongs; but here was a man, honored, respected and trusted, a man whom no one

had wronged, deliberately plotting to rob and, perhaps, murder his benefactor.

He crossed the bridge, passed over the hill, and was in a lane, with a hedgerow on either side. The sun was setting, and the farmers had already unharnessed their horses and gone home. The eastern sky had already grown darker and a star had appeared, when he turned about to retrace his steps. Suddenly the sound of a horse's feet fell on his ear. He cast a furtive glance over his shoulder and saw a horseman coming toward him. In a moment the man was at his side, and a gruff, familiar voice said:

"Hello! That you?"

With a shudder he recognized the terrible train-robber, Bill. Bill leaped from the saddle to his side and said:

"How air ye, anyway?"

"All right."

"Good! The boss gits kind a little uneasy about ye sometimes."

"Why?"

"'Fraid ye 'll make a blunder an' git jugged. But don't ye git scared 'f they do, fur we boys 'll git ye out. Th' jail at Starkeville won't hold one o' us boys long."

Arthur had never thought of a prison before, and it made him shudder. The disgrace of arrest and imprisonment, which had had such little terrors for him before, now that he had become acquainted with Grace Hawley, unnerved him. She would then know that he was a common thief. At last he asked:

"What are you doing here? Is it not dangerous?"

With a reckless, defiant laugh, Bill answered:

"No. Ain't no un in these parts as knows me. Why, I rid right up ter ther saloon and tuk a drink. Hev ye seen Bob Maddox ter-day?"

"No."

"Wall, d'ye know anything 'bout them State funds?"

"Only that they expect them soon."

"An' ye don't know how soon?"

"No."

"Wall, ther boss is scratchin' his head mightily."

"He will have to scratch. I can't hurry the matter any, and when they come he will be informed."

Bill remounted and rode away, and Arthur returned to his hotel. A day or two later business again called him to the mansion of General Hawley, and he once more met Grace. She had a new novel, which she had just finished and gratefully gave to him to read, asking him for a critical opinion of it. When he had read it, he returned it and gave a sensible criticism of the work, and they strolled in the garden; and somehow, before he knew it, he asked if he could come again, and she answered in the affirmative. He went, and once more listened to the music of her sweet voice, which to him was enchanting. Oh, happy hours! oh, miserable hours! they dwell in his memory yet, stealing the sweets of heaven, with the consciousness of a yawning hell at his feet. He can never forget those long autumn days, when it seemed as

though heaven and earth united in one untiring jubilee; when the rich, warm air that fanned the heated cheek was burdened with the aroma of ripened fruit, far more delightfully intoxicating than cider or wine; when nature seemed strewing every inch of earth's broad bosom with a matured beauty more lovely than the boast of May or June. Many a pleasant and many a terrible reminiscence does he cherish of that brightest and darkest of all periods of his life.

One day when they were in the flower garden, where many of her late beauties were still in bloom, she seated herself on a rustic bench, and, looking up in his face, asked:

"Mr. Fowler, did you ever have cause to feel grateful toward a stranger?"

He gazed on her beautiful face, which was now all seriousness, and answered:

"I have, on several occasions—"

"But suppose you were in great peril some time, and a mysterious, unknown person should save your life at the risk of his own, could you ever forget him?"

He was trembling so his limbs could hardly support him, and seated himself opposite her and stammered:

"I was never placed in such a position, but if I ever should be, I certainly would feel exceedingly grateful."

She bowed her pretty head on her hand a moment, and her eyes grew dim as she continued:

"People cannot tell how they would feel until

they have undergone my terrible experience. I was once on a midnight train, with no one whom I knew. The train was signalled, stopped and boarded by great, dark monsters, wearing black masks over their faces, uttering such terrible threats as to make the blood run cold to think of them. One monster, seeming more cruel and terrible than the rest, after plundering me of all the money and jewelry I possessed, demanded my earrings, which I could not take out. He drew a fearful looking-knife, and was about to cut them out of my ears, when a noble stranger came to my rescue."

"Did you learn his name?"

"No. I would give much to know him, although he was one of the robbers. He must have a brave and noble heart."

After a few moments to recover himself, he asked:

"What would you do if you knew his name, and knew where he was?"

"I would reward him. First I would persuade him to quit such a life. One so brave and noble cannot have a bad heart, and he might be persuaded to lead a different life."

The voice of the bookkeeper was too husky and his throat too full for him to venture to speak, and she went on:

"I did not see his face, for, like the others, he wore a mask, but it must have been noble; the voice, so brave and commanding and yet so soft and tender to a girl in distress, would indicate a noble soul."

"If he should quit the life he leads, and resolved to do better," Arthur ventured, after a few moments, "what would it benefit him? The laws he has broken demand his life and liberty."

"But he might go away to some distant land and begin life anew."

"He would be hunted by detectives wherever he went, seized at last and brought back."

She was silent for a moment, and then said:

"I know the Governor. He is an intimate friend of ours, and if this man was young in years, and not so very bad, he might be pardoned."

Arthur almost started from his seat. Strange he had never before even thought of a pardon. He had never before seen any escape, save in the prison and death. After a few moments she changed the subject by saying:

"Have you read of the young man Horace Rathburne, in prison at Standish for bank robbery?" He answered in the affirmative, and she continued: "It is a sad story. He declares he is innocent, and his sweetheart believes him. The dear girl visits him despite her father's opposition. How I wish I knew her and could console her in her grief."

They talked until the stars were out and the evening air was chilly, then he insisted on her going in the house.

Next day, just as the bookkeeper was about to close his books and leave the bank, Mr. Meeker, with a smile, said:

"A word with you, George. They are all gone but us, and the building is locked."

"What have you to say?"

"You are carrying your good behavior a little too far."

"I don't understand you."

"To be more plain, there is danger in the way you are carrying your flirtation with Miss Hawley."

"Is she to marry you?"

"I don't know," he stammered.

"I could not supersede you if she was."

"That is not the danger I want to warn you against," said Mr. Meeker, clearing his throat. "The chief knows of this; he fears there will be an attachment and that you, in a fit of love, may act the fool and give us away."

Arthur, with a reckless laugh, said something about there being no danger, and so terminated the interview. As they were going away, Meeker placed his hand on the young man's shoulder and whispered:

"Beware; don't go near her if you can help it. It may be only a plot to entrap you."

Arthur went to his room in the hotel, and gazing on the motto, read it with a new meaning, and in his heart cried:

"God help me, it shall not be done. If I die I will warn that good man and save his life and property. I may hang for this, and the least I can expect is the penitentiary, but, God be praised, I will do the right."

Then a joy, a holy peace such as he had never known came over his soul. He took the handker-

chief from his pocket, on the corner of which was the stain of the blood from the wounded forehead of the girl he had saved, kissed it, repeated anew his vow, and feeling now that he could approach God in prayer, fell upon his knees to ask Him to keep him steadfast in his new purpose.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FLORA'S NEW SUITOR.

For three or four days after the exciting events narrated in chapter twenty-four, Uncle Reuben's tavern was very quiet. The mysterious guests departed, taking the wounded man with them, without giving a word of explanation. There came a rumor from Rushville, where they boarded the train, that they were not deer hunters, but Chicago detectives. Mrs. Howard, who had been most affected by the event, became very reticent after it was all over, and she learned that no one was killed or captured.

"Who could that stranger be whose approach caused such commotion?" asked Flora of Mrs. Howard.

"I cannot say," she answered.

"Perhaps he was one with whom they had quarreled."

"Probably. I trust no more such events may take place."

Cater, who had been frightened as badly as any one, declared that he was perfectly cool all the time and not "fooled" in the three strangers. Shaking his gray head, he told Aunt Aggy he knew why they had come to Newburg, and what made them act so mysteriously.

"Wut ye talkin' about, Cater? Ye doan know nuffin' 'tall about et."

"Now, bless yer soul, Aunt Aggy, reckin' I knows all about et."

"Whut ye know, anyhow?"

"Well, dem udder towns, Chicago an' St. Louis, am gittin' mighty envious o' Newburg, 'cause she 's gettin' prosperous, an' dey hire dese three men ter com an' drive all custom away, ter give a bad name to a 'spectable place."

Some other surmises were very little short of old Cater's.

Three or four days after the sudden departure of the three guests, Cater went to Rushville, and brought Flora a letter bearing the post-mark of Standish. It was in the handwriting of her lover, and her heart bounded with joy at sight of it.

"Does it contain good news or bad?" she asked, gazing on the missive. She broke the seal, and took the letter out. It contained several pages closely written, and was filled with tender expres-

sions, though there was scarcely a ray of hope in it from beginning to end. Among other things he said:

"My preliminary examination was held yesterday, and I am remanded to jail to await the action of the Grand Jury. They will find a bill against me. Two witnesses swore positively they saw me and recognized me as one of the robbers. I think if my lawyer had cross-examined them more carefully, they would have admitted the possibility of a doubt. This, with an *alibi*, would have acquitted me beyond question. The *alibi* is the most difficult thing to prove. On that particular afternoon I was traveling in company with a stranger who called himself Grogan. He was a man of thirty-five or forty years of age, with blue eyes, and dark-brown whiskers, neatly trimmed. I particularly remember him by his riding a roan horse, with one ear as black as jet. I think it was the left ear that was black. However, I am not certain as to that. Where he lived he did not tell me. Where he is to be found I cannot say, but a shrewd man, by liberal advertising, could find him. My lawyer tried it, but he is wholly incompetent to handle so important a matter. I am unable to secure a better one, however, and must trust him. It is hard to know that one is innocent yet unable to convince the world; but let us hope the sun may yet dispel these dense clouds, and warm our hearts with happiness."

She dropped the letter in her lap and wept awhile, then, drying her tears, began seriously to consider the matter.

"He is unfortunate in being poor and uninfluential. He needs a lawyer, one capable to handle so important a case, and he shall have one. Colonel

John W. Hale, my mother's cousin, is one of the best lawyers in Missouri; he is especially fond of me, and I will enlist his interest in Horace."

She took the matter under consideration for a day or two, then summoned Mrs. Howard to a consultation in her room.

"Mrs. Howard, I am going to take a journey. Will you go with me?" she asked.

"Where?"

"To Starkeville."

"That is a long way off."

"Seventy-five miles, I believe, and we will have to make it in a private conveyance, for there are no railroad connections; but I will defray all the expenses of the journey."

Mrs. Howard bowed her white face a moment in thought, as if she was studying the matter over. Finally she asked:

"How long shall we be gone?"

"Four days; perhaps five."

"What shall I do with the children?"

"Leave them with Aunt Rachel."

After another brief silence, Mrs. Howard said:

"I will give you my answer in the morning."

"That will do."

Mrs. Howard went to her room that night, and Cater afterward declared that when all the house save himself was buried in slumber she rose and stole from the house; that he watched her trip down the road through the wood pasture, where the "ha'nted church" stood, to hold communion with evil spirits. But everybody knew that Cater

possessed a most fertile imagination, and due allowance was made for him.

Next morning Mrs. Howard told Flora that she would accompany her.

"Heaven bless you, my good friend!" cried Flora, throwing her arms about her neck. "What would I do but for you?"

"Have you ever been to Starkeville?" asked Mrs. Howard.

"No."

"Have you met this cousin of yours—Colonel Hale?"

"Frequently. He has visited at our house. His daughter Anne and I were at boarding school together, and we love each other like sisters."

"Did you ever hear her speak of Mr. Meeker?" asked Mrs. Howard.

"No. Who is he?"

"A person living in Starkeville." But as Flora was not interested in him no further reference was made to him.

Mrs. Howard and Flora began to make arrangements for the journey, and hoped to be able to start in three days. A liveryman at Rushville who owned an open carriage, among his other equipages, was engaged to take them. Aunt Rachel, who mildly opposed the scheme at first, was finally won over to it, and did all in her power to help the travellers get ready. Uncle Reuben, who never favored nor seriously opposed anything, grumbled some, then smoked his pipe in silence.

On the day before the intended departure of

Flora and Mrs. Howard for Starkeville, an important event transpired, which we dare not omit. It was the arrival of Mr. Josiah Hunt. He came in a strictly business-like manner, and was so thoroughly absorbed in his avocation that he had omitted to leave his scissors at home, while the tape with which he measured articles was rolled up in his vest pocket. It was the middle of the afternoon when he reached Rushville, and engaging a carriage and driver, was taken at once to Newburg. When he alighted he approached Uncle Reuben very much as he would a new customer, with a smile and a "cheapest in the market" expression on his face. Uncle Reuben listened to him with indifference while he was telling who he was, and at the conclusion asked :

"Do ye want t' stay here awhile?"

"Well, yes, for just a short time. Does a young lady stop with you named Miss Flora Wells?"

"Yes—she 's my niece."

"I want to see her."

"I think she 's up in 'er room. I 'll send Aggy t' see, 'f ye want me to."

"Not at present, not at present, sir. Let me go to my room, get washed and brush the dust from my clothes. It is not very comfortable travelling, I assure you."

"Cater—Cater!"

"Yes, sah!"

Cater came from the kitchen, and on seeing the new guest, clasped his hands mentally and exclaimed :

"Anodder one, bress de Lawd! Why, Unc Reuben done gwine t' git rich, I reckin."

"Cater, take this man's things up t' th' north room," said Uncle Reuben, rubbing the end of a match against the post to light his pipe.

Cater cast a glance at the man who had just arrived, and taking up his hand-bag, told him to "foller," and led the way up the stairs to the room designated by Uncle Reuben as the north room. Placing the hand-bag gingerly on the floor, he stared at the merchant.

"What are you looking at me for, you ace of spades?" asked Josiah.

"Say, boss, ye ain't anodder one?"

"Another what?"

"Anodder fellar whut be raisin' de debil in Newburg, whut pertended ter be deer-hunters an' aint?"

"Have you had any who pretended to be deer-hunters and were not?"

"'Deed we did, boss, an' dey a'most scart de life out ob ebberybody but dis chile."

"How?"

"Dey was a-stayin' heah quiet like, an' one day er man come ridin' up ter stay all night, an' dey jist jumps fur dar revolvers an' went ter blazin' erway. Aunt Rachel, she fell in a tub o' soapsuds; Aggy most sawed her head off on a clothes-line, an' Unc' Reuben climbed inter de stable loft; but, golly! dis chile jis run right out dar an' make um quit dat foolin'."

"What became of those interesting parties?" asked Josiah.

"Guess dey got scart at me, boss, fur dey all went off, an' gone—don't know wha'."

Not relishing the company of Cater, whom he suspected to be a champion liar, he dispatched him for a pitcher of water, and the old man went away, murmuring:

"Hope ter goodness dis one ain't like de odders, nohow!"

He returned, placed the water at the disposal of Mr. Hunt, and left him alone. Josiah, with all his business qualifications and business tact, realized that he was engaged on rather extraordinary business, and that more than ordinary care was necessary to please this fastidious customer. Mr. Josiah Hunt believed that if there was a man in all the great State of Missouri who thoroughly understood women, it was himself. Had he not sold them calicoes, linens and silks since he was high enough to reach the counter? And if a retail dry goods clerk does not understand a woman's whims, who does?

Mr. Hunt was always neat and tidy. His shirt front was immaculate, and his sleeves, collars and cuffs perfection, while his aristocratically small hands were white, and just what a lady customer would admire. When he had arranged his toilet to suit the most fastidious taste, he went to Flora's room to announce his arrival. She was not very much astonished, for she had witnessed his arrival from the window, and was puzzling her brain to find some excuse for his presence. She greeted him in a friendly and formal manner, but nothing more;

that, however, to a business man like Mr. Hunt, was sufficient.

After a few preliminary remarks in regard to her health, happiness and the weather, Mr. Hunt launched out upon the object of his visit in a most business-like manner.

"I regret, Miss Wells," he said, "not to have been able to come sooner to make this proposition, but our fall and winter stock has just arrived, and we were busy invoicing, so I was compelled to defer it until that was over;" and he involuntarily drew a pencil from his vest pocket as if about to add up a long column of figures. "But now that I am here, I will make amends for the delay by coming at once to business. I mentioned the matter to your father, and he approves of it, as any business man would. You see it is thought better for us to extend our business. Now the uniting of two such houses as Hunt and Wells would make a firm in Missouri that would be a power."

Flora gazed at him in astonishment, wondering what she could have to do with the co-partnership of Hunt and Wells. But he soon explained to her that this union was to come about out of the ordinary business way.

"You see, Miss Wells," he added, spreading his immaculate white linen handkerchief before him, as if it was a bolt of silk from which he was to cut a dress-pattern, "I have known you for a long time, and have always admired you. I knew you were an estimable young lady, and that you would make a desirable wife, but before I could mention the mat-

ter to you I learned that your father's chief clerk had spoken to you on the subject, and was discharged for his presumption. Now that he has met with this recent misfortune, of course you will not think of keeping your part of the engagement with him, so I have come to offer my hand."

She gazed at him in amazement. This cool, off-hand, business-like manner of wooing not only astonished her, but filled her with indignation. After taking some time to gain her self-possession, she answered:

"Mr. Hunt, you are too much a man of business to appreciate what the world is sometimes pleased to call sentimentalism; yet there are some who believe the hand should not be given without the heart, and I am one of those persons. While I have long known you as a worthy business man, honorable and upright in every respect, I can never be your wife."

"Why, Miss Wells, I assure you that a better bargain—"

"Hold, Mr. Hunt, you are neither buying nor selling goods now."

"Miss Wells, you cannot entertain any desire for the man in jail for robbery!"

These words were the Promethean spark that kindled the fire of indignation in the maiden's breast, and, in a voice of command, she cried:

"Silence, sir!"

"He is a thief—"

"Mr. Hunt, leave my presence."

"What!" he cried, in amazement.

"Go, I say! There is the door, go!" and no heroine in tragedy ever uttered the command in a sterner voice. He glanced at her, astonished and hot with anger to think that Horace in jail was preferred to him; but Josiah was a gentleman, even if he was a little hasty in temper, and he made a cold bow and left the room.

Uncle Reuben was called, and Cater sent to harness the horse to the old rockaway. Nothing could induce him to wait until morning, and that very night he was driven to the station, and took the midnight train for Huntsville.

"'Clar ter goodness, dar mo' curious folks comin' ter Newburg dan dis chile evah heah tell on afore," declared old Cater, as he drove the rockaway home.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ROAN HORSE WITH THE BLACK EAR.

It was not much annoyance to Flora, and before morning she had forgotten it. Her whole mind was occupied with one object—that was the man riding the roan horse with the black ear. The rider of that steed could save Horace from either death or a long term at penal servitude. Since receiving his letter she had thought of nothing but the roan horse with a black ear. She had dreamed of it, and often found herself gazing down the road, hoping to see the horse and rider coming toward the old tavern.

The eventful morning of their departure came, and the carriage—one of those large, modern-styled vehicles built phaeton fashion—was at the door for them. Mrs. Howard bade her children an affectionate adieu, consigned them to the care of Aunt Rachel and the Lord, and took her seat by the side of Flora, who was already in the carriage. The driver sat in the front seat, holding the reins, while the pair of bays attached to the vehicle stamped with impatience.

"Good-bye!" cried Mrs. Howard to Uncle Reuben and Aunt Rachel. Tossing kisses to her children,

she cried: "God bless you, little ones, and keep you until mamma returns!"

The carriage rolled away, and the old tavern, with its weather-beaten sign, was soon lost to view. Flora will never forget that journey, and how tender and careful Mrs. Howard was with her. She breathed words of comfort and consolation in her ears when no one else dared. Had not Flora been constantly tormented with her lover's peril, the journey would have been pleasant. The weather was warm—almost as warm as summer. Marguerites and golden-rods lined the road, and the odors from the orchards burdened with ripened fruit rivaled May and June. The tall corn, with its matured blades, rustled in the gentle breeze.

They passed a large farmhouse on the hill. A man in his shirt-sleeves was sitting on the stiles, an ax at his side and a wood-pile near. A large, yellow dog barked at them. There was a horse-pond in the lowlands on the left. An old horse was standing in the water to cool his legs, slashing the flies with his tail. Their carriage rolled on and crossed the bridge that spanned the creek. The scenery was varied, and to Flora it seemed one constant shifting panorama. Hills and forests gave way to gentle, undulating prairies with vast farms and rich fields, and these in turn gave place to more hills and forests. At noon they came to a small inland village. The spire of the little church could be seen for many miles away, for it was on the highest bit of ground in the village. When they entered the village the blacksmith was shoeing a

farmer's horse. The farmer, in shirt-sleeves, stood at the animal's head, holding him, and switching the flies away with a horse-tail brush. There were two or three general stores in the place, with their square fronts and porches, on which sat two or three men engaged in gossiping, or discussing politics.

There was a small inn at the farther end of the town, where they made a halt for dinner. The landlord was a tall, lank man, with high cheek-bones and a few whiskers on his chin. He called a boy to assist the driver in feeding and grooming the horses, and our two travellers were shown to a room where they could wash the dust from their faces and rest awhile. Then the dinner-bell rang. It was a plain, substantial repast, and the morning ride had given the travellers an appetite. After a short hour's "nooning," the horses were once more harnessed to the carriage, and all parties refreshed, resumed their journey. Sometimes their road was broad and smooth, showing evidence of frequent travel, and sometimes it was dim and uncertain, with misleading finger boards.

Paschal, the driver, who boasted of his knowledge, not only of that road, but of roads in general, was often compelled to halt farmers going to and from their work and inquire the way. The prairies, with their smooth, level paths, again gave way to belts of timber, creeks and hills. If the carriage rattled at a dangerous rate down one hill, it was drawn at a creeping pace up another, while the heat and dust became almost stifling. Paschal was a

very accommodating coachman, and did all in his power for the comfort of the fair travellers. He stopped at a small farmhouse to ask for a glass of cold water for the thirsty ladies, and the tall, hard-featured woman, whose very face told of a life of toil and privation, said such as they had she would give.

"I hev t' pack* every drap o' water we git frum th' pond er quarter away."

The water was so stale and so warm that the ladies preferred to wait until some better could be found, although their throats were parched and dry. Night found the travellers in a very lonely part of the country, at one of those old-fashioned roadside inns now almost extinct, and even then very rare. Flora did not like the looks of that great, old, lonesome house, and asked Paschal to go on, but he said it was ten miles to the next town, and it would be impossible to make it that night. The landlord was a savage-looking man with fierce, dark eyes, who, Flora declared, would murder one for twenty-five cents; but Mrs. Howard only laughed at her fears, and said she was frightened at appearances; and they must put up with that place anyway, for they could reach no other that night. They were all tired and expressed a desire to go to bed early; so, shortly after "candle-light," they were shown upstairs to their sleeping apartments. A long, narrow hall ran the length of the house in the upper story, and Flora was given a room on the opposite side from Mrs. Howard's. In Flora's room

* *Pack* is a term used among the illiterate for carry.

there was nothing but a bed, two chairs and a very large, heavy chest, while the door was without any kind of fastening, not even a latch, but she managed to pull the chest in front of it, so that no one could open it without awaking her.

Poor Flora was so nervous and excited that, notwithstanding she was tired, she did not go to sleep until midnight. Then she was only dozing, when she awoke with a start. Some one had pushed against her door. A voice, in a hushed whisper, said:

"No, no, not that; she ain't in there."

"This un," answered the voice, which she thought was the landlord's.

Under the blood-freezing belief that some one was to be murdered or robbed, poor Flora started and crept to the door, which was partially ajar, the man having pushed back the chest. Filled with dread and curiosity to know what was going on, she placed her ear near to the aperture. Voices were whispering at Mrs. Howard's door, and Flora recognized Mrs. Howard's among others. Curiosity overcame fear, and she tried to catch some of the words that fell from the lips of those engaged in conversation. Only a fragment now and then could be heard.

"* * * there is no danger." This from Mrs. Howard.

"I doubt if it will do any good."

"* * * I could not refuse."

"How long will you be away?"

"Four or five days. That will be all right, won't it?" she asked.

"Yes * * * * be careful."

"I shall * * *". Then came much which she could not understand. At last she heard something about a roan horse with a black ear. She was not quite sure that this was not a freak of her imagination, for she had dwelt so long on that horse that she sometimes half believed she was losing her mind on the subject. Mrs. Howard was at last heard to say:

"You must do something to help—"

"I will do all I can. * *."

All that Flora heard was spoken in whispers, and to her it was very much like a dream. She waited until that strange man had gone away, then closed the door, and, pushing the chest against it, went to bed.

They resumed their journey next day, but she said nothing to Mrs. Howard about the conversation she had overheard. Starkeville was reached at noon, and they put up at the Continental House, where, after a bath, toilet and dinner, Flora started to find the law office of John W. Hale. It was not a difficult matter to find the office of such a well-known man, and the first person of whom she inquired told her it was over the Hawley bank. Flora went alone, for Mrs. Howard was fatigued and had a headache, and she persuaded her to remain in the room until she returned.

Colonel Hale was in his office, and alone, when Flora entered. He was looking over some legal-looking documents, and glanced over his spectacles at the pretty visitor. One glance at the pale face

and tired form, and he started to his feet, exclaiming:

"Good afternoon, young lady! What can I do for you?"

"Don't you recognize me?" she asked.

"What! Why, isn't this Cousin Flora? Of course it is. Where did you come from, child?" He saw that she was faint, and placed a chair for her. Then, turning to a refrigerator that contained ice-water, he drew a glass and offered it to her. "You are tired."

"Thank you," sipping the water. "We have travelled since yesterday in a carriage."

"From home?"

"No; from Uncle Reuben Price's tavern, at Newburg."

"I don't believe I know where that is."

"It is seventy-five miles away."

"And did you come to see me?"

"Yes," she answered, tears gathering in her eyes. "Don't you know it all, cousin? My name has been in all the papers; you must have read it."

He had read it, but, out of a tender regard for her feelings, had refrained from making any allusion to it. Sinking in his chair, he involuntarily murmured:

"Good Heaven, Flora! Is it as bad as this?"

She tried to speak, but her sobs interrupted her. Realizing that she had something of great importance to communicate, and as they might be interrupted in the main office, he asked her to come with him into the consultation-room and there tell him

all. Seated in an easy-chair, she commenced her story of her lover, whom she painted an honorable, upright and perfect man. Unhesitatingly she told of their betrothal, of the father's opposition and of his discharging Horace.

"I have read all that in the papers, my dear."

"You have also read how he was arrested and thrown into prison for a crime of which he is innocent."

"Yes, I have read he was in prison. What more?"

"There is no more, only at the preliminary examination some men swore positively that he was one of the robbers."

"Well, Flora, how can I help him?"

"You can, Colonel, if you will."

"How?"

"On the afternoon of the robbery, at that very hour, he was twenty miles away from Standish on a lonely road, in company with a man named Grogan, who rode a roan horse with a black ear."

The lawyer's keenest interest was now aroused, for he clearly saw a point for the defense.

"Where is this man who has the roan horse with a black ear?" he asked. "He is essential to prove an *alibi*."

"Alas, I know not. The lawyer appointed to defend Horace is young, inexperienced and incompetent to handle a case of such importance, and cannot be depended upon. He made some feeble efforts to find the man, but has failed, and is now in despair."

"Why doesn't he get a better lawyer?"

"That is my mission here. I assure you that Horace knows nothing of this visit. He does not know that we are related, or that you are my friend. Father hates Horace, because he loves me, and will do nothing for him. Horace is poor and unable to employ a lawyer to defend him, and I have come to you to plead, to implore you to help him—to save him. Oh, I shall die if he is convicted."

Colonel Hale had a tender heart, and the tears of Flora soon moved him to consent to take the case.

"I can't promise much," he said. "You must not lose sight of the fact that the public mind is set against him and all bank robbers, and the defense will have to be clear. The *alibi* will have to be proven without a doubt. All depends on the roan horse with the black ear. I never saw or heard of such an animal; but if there is such, it must be found. Its rider will save him."

All was arranged. He was to meet her in Standish one week from that day, where they would have an interview with the prisoner, and talk with the two principal witnesses, whom the lawer thought there might be a possibility of shaking in their positiveness. He took the little, thin hand in his own, and gazing into those blue eyes full of tears, trust and hope, said:

"My dear child, I will do all I can. Your father will be very angry with me for being interested in this case, but I can't help it. Your tears and confidence in your lover's innocence would convince any one but an angry father or a stupid jury."

Next morning they took their departure from Starkeville, and Flora sat with head bowed as the carriage rolled away. Colonel Hale had tried to encourage her, yet the very manner of the lawyer was calculated to give her little hope.

"Mrs. Howard, if he is convicted, how long a sentence will they give him?" she asked, when they left the town far behind them.

"About twenty-five years," she answered. "They don't show much mercy to men who rob banks."

"Twenty-five years is a very long time. He is twenty-three now, he will be forty-eight then, and I forty-three. We will be quite old, will we not?"

"Oh, no, dear. People are only considered in their prime between forty and fifty, if they are careful of their health."

She dared not tell her that in penal servitude it would require a constitution of iron to survive twenty-five years. Perhaps no man had ever served so long a term in the Missouri Penitentiary.

It was the middle of the afternoon; the carriage had been rolling along a dusty road that led through a wood. They came to a small stream spanned by a bridge, with a ford above the bridge where one might cross, as the water was shallow; but their driver preferred the bridge, as the banks to the ford were steep. As they were crossing the bridge, Flora saw a man ride down the bank toward the water. There was nothing about the horseman to attract particular attention. He wore a long, dark ulster, a broad-brimmed hat, and his face was covered with a dark-brown well-trimmed beard. He

stopped his horse in the water and loosened the rein to let the animal drink. The carriage started down the eastern slope of the bridge, every moment going farther from the Missourian. The horse was a roan, but there were hundreds of roan horses, and she had no thought of calling her companion's attention to this one. But the animal suddenly raised its head from the water and started across the stream, and she saw that one ear was black as jet. She shrieked with joy.

"What is the matter?" asked Mrs. Howard.

"It is he! It is he!" she screamed, making an effort to leap from the carriage.

Fearing her reason had suddenly become dethroned, Mrs. Howard made frantic efforts to hold her, but she tore loose and leaped into the road. By this time the man on the roan horse with the black ear had ascended the bank and was galloping over the hill.

"Stop, stop, stop! Now that I have found you, you shall not escape!" cried Flora, running at the top of her speed after him.

He did not hear her, continued to gallop on and disappeared over the hill. She ran and ran until she fell senseless in the dust. Mrs. Howard, who was in close pursuit, came on her at this moment and raised her from the ground.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FLORA AND THE WITNESSES.

"Ha' the diel got into them women folks?" Paschal asked, turning the carriage about and pursuing them. Putting the horses to a gallop, he was, in a few moments, alongside Mrs. Howard, who was supporting Flora in her arms, brushing the dust from her face. "Be she dead?" asked the driver.

"No. Lift her in the carriage, then drive into the water above the bridge. We must have water to restore her."

Flora was quickly lifted into the carriage and they were soon rattling away to the ford. He drew up midway in the stream, where the water came nearly to the axles, and standing on the step, Mrs. Howard bent over and, dipping her hand in the stream, washed the dust from the face of the unconscious girl. Before she had completed her work, Flora had regained consciousness, and looking about, said:

"Where is he? Did you catch him?"

"Who, my dear?" asked Mrs. Howard, fearing that her mind wandered.

"The man on the roan horse with the black ear?

Oh! we must not let him escape. We must find him."

It took some time for her to explain matters fully, and the man was already out of sight and rapidly riding away, so they could not hope to find him. They went to the nearest farmhouse and made careful inquiry for him, but no one had ever seen such a horse. Two boys, by promise of a liberal reward, were stimulated to make an effort to find him, but failed. They would have come to the conclusion that no such being existed had they not met Bill Jones, who declared he had seen "sich a hoss at Blackwell's store on th' cross roads."

This incident detained them a whole day, and then Flora, hoping and despairing, started once more for Newburg tavern. Uncle Reuben and Aunt Rachel, who lived in constant fear that Jordon Wells would come in Flora's absence "and give them fits," were rejoiced to see them safe back. Mrs. Howard's children ran to meet her; she kissed them fondly, and promised never to leave them so long again.

"Has father been here since I left?" Flora asked.

"No, but there's a letter in yer room for ye."

In was from her mother, who was anxious concerning her health, and wanted her to come home.

"I must not go now," she thought. "It would ruin all if I left at this time." She appealed to Aunt Rachel to invent some excuse for delaying her return. The result was a carefully written letter by Aunt Rachel, Mrs. Howard acting as amanuensis, stating how happy and reconciled Flora

was, and that her health was improving, concluding with the assurance that if left with herself a few weeks longer she would thoroughly recover. This epistle had the desired effect, and the visit was prolonged.

On the day she was to meet Colonel Hale in Standish, she started alone for that town ; for Aunt Rachel vowed she would not risk her neck "in them plaguey kears ag'in," and Mrs. Howard could not leave her children. She found the Colonel at the hotel. Taking her hand, he said :

"I got your letter about the roan horse with the black ear, and have been doing all in my power to find the owner of that animal."

"Have you heard nothing of it?"

"Yes, I heard twice about the horse. It was seen at a country store the same day, which proves that yours was not a delusion. It was seen next day at Dummy's Mill, but no one had ever seen the rider or horse before."

"Did any one talk with him?"

"No."

"Nor know where he was going?"

"Not a person. The fellow who rode that horse seems as hard to find as the mythical Peter Rugg ; but we will find him, never fear."

"Then such a person exists? I was not mistaken?"

"No, you were not mistaken."

"I had begun to fear I might be growing insane."

With a laugh, he placed his large, strong hand on her head, and said :

"Not in the least, my dear. Now, when you have rested, we will begin business."

"I am rested. Let us go at once and see Horace."

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"I am conducting this defense, and must have my way," he answered, with a pleasant smile on his good-natured face. "Have you ever met the witnesses for the State?"

"Not since the accusation."

"Well, that is so much better. I have sent for them."

"Why did you do that?"

"I want to talk with them."

She began to see the wisdom of the course he had marked out, and wisely decided to abide by what he did and said. They had not long to wait for Enoch Ralls. He came into the apartment of the lawyer, his hat in his hand, his bald head glistening, and his eyes round with wonder. He was a short, stout, stoop-shouldered man, with a meek and lowly manner.

"Are you Mr. Enoch Ralls?" asked the lawyer, rising and taking his hand.

"Yes, sir."

"I am happy to meet you. Be seated."

Enoch took a seat on the sofa, passed his hand over his bald head, and looked puzzled. The lawyer, carefully closing the door, threw himself into a seat opposite the witness, and asked:

"How long have you lived in Missouri, Mr. Ralls?"

"'Bout twenty-five years."

"What business do you follow?"

"Wall, I do most anything I kin git t' do. Sometimes I digs wells ur works in cellars, an' set fence posts ur saw wood, ur do anything I kin git t' do," and he again passed his hand over his bald pate.

"You know Mr. Jordan Wells?"

"Yes, used t' work fur Jordan two ur three yeers ergo."

"Where did you come from, when you emigrated to Missouri?" the lawyer asked.

"Frum Kaintucky."

"Is that your native State?"

"I wuz born thar, 'f that's wot yer drivin' at."

"Do you know this young lady?"

Enoch gave Flora a scrutinizing stare, and said:

"I b'lieve she's Jordan Wells's gal."

"She is Miss Wells."

"Thought I'd seen 'er erabout the place."

"You know Horace Rathburne?"

"Yes, I know Horace."

"Intimately?"

"Yes, tollerable well."

"Don't you know him very well? Were not you and he great cronies, and together much of the time?"

"No, we never run t'gether; ye see, he ran with a different set frum mine," said Enoch, modestly.

"Why, I thought you knew him well?"

"Yes, I've seen him in Jordan's store, when I worked round thar."

"Was that your only acquaintance with him?"

"Yes."

"And not very well acquainted at that?"

"Well, I dun know—"

"You think you knew him when you saw him?"

"Yes."

"Only think so?"

"Yes, I knowed him."

The lawyer, by asking leading questions, was trying to entrap the witness, but Enoch was too wary for that. He fixed his eyes on the lawyer with an undaunted stare, and added:

"If it 's that bank robbery yer harpin' on, I 'll tell ye right here he was thar. I saw him."

"Mr. Ralls, was there not some excitement there on that occasion?"

"Yes, a good deal," he answered, in a drawling tone.

"Would one's judgment be as good and one's eye as keen with men shooting at him as on an ordinary occasion?"

"Well, I reckin' not."

"May it not be possible that you saw some one who looked like Horace Rathburne?" asked Flora, who was unable longer to keep quiet. Enoch fixed his faded blue eyes on the pretty face, and said:

"Thar hain't no use o' talkin', Miss, I know Horace Rathburne, an' it wuz his face I saw."

"Could you not be mistaken?"

"No."

"You swear it, positively?"

"Yes."

The lawyer, who had been making frantic efforts

to keep her quiet and leave the matter to him, now put in with:

"Mr. Ralls, many a man has sworn positively to what he believed to be true, and been mistaken. Men have been hung on mistaken testimony. Now, you have no ill-will against this unfortunate young man?"

"Oh! I hain't got nuthin' agin' Horace; he allers treated me white."

"Then you want to hang him, or send him to the penitentiary for life?"

"No, I don't want nuthin' to do with et; but then I won't swear to a lie even fur him."

"But you may, after all, be mistaken?"

"Can't be, sir."

"Don't you know there are so many people who look alike that nearly every man has his double?"

"Yes; but thar hain't but one Horace, an' he was thar."

"Did you hear him speak?"

"No; thar warn't no time. I jist seed his face ez he come a tumblin' down on my back, an' I sed t' Jack I knowed who et wuz; and Jack sed he know'd too; an' both know'd twuz Horace ez used t' clerk fur Jordan Wells."

Try as he would, the lawyer found himself unable to shake the belief of the witness, so, after asking him a few more questions, he told him he might go.

"Ef I 'd a-knowed ye wanted me t' come up here t' talk erbout that, blamed 'f I 'd a-come a step," growled Enoch, as he donned his hat and walked out.

A few moments later Jack Auglin entered, and the lawyer proceeded to interrogate him as closely as he dared without bringing on himself the accusation of tampering with a witness for the State; but little more satisfaction could be gained from Jack than he was able to obtain from Enoch, and the lawyer was in despair. He tried to keep up a cheerful appearance for Flora's sake, but it was difficult.

"What do you think about the case now?" asked Flora.

"I don't know. I have not talked with my client yet."

"Let us go to see Horace."

There was no reason for longer delaying the visit, so they went. The lawyer waited in the hall for Flora to enter the cell first and acquaint her lover of the arrangement. After she had been ten minutes with the prisoner, he entered, and found both in tears. He began conversing with Horace, and from the first was struck with the young man's honest face and genteel manner. His story was a simple and pathetic one. On the day of the robbery he was riding a horse he had purchased from Mr. Bunce along an unfrequented road toward a village some distance south of Standish, where he thought Flora's father had sent her. It was his intention to see his lady-love, have an understanding with her, and then leave to hunt up a position, and as soon as able to support a wife to come for her. About two o'clock in the afternoon he fell in company with a stranger, who rode a roan horse with a

black ear. He recounted the conversation they had had together, and was certain it was six o'clock before they had separated at a place where the roads forked. He did not inquire the man's residence, or what business he was engaged in, but thought he was a farmer or cattle buyer. He only knew that his name was Grogan. The lawyer asked a few more questions and left, telling Flora to join him at the hotel.

"God bless you," whispered the prisoner when they were alone. "Never was a man happier than I, for never before had man such proof of love."

"Horace, you will surely be acquitted. God will not permit such a wrong!" sobbed Flora.

The prisoner took the fair girl in his arms, and whispered:

"Pray, dearest! I have more faith in your prayers than in any lawyer's skill."

The jailer said it was time to close up, and after a lingering embrace they separated. She brushed the tears from her cheeks and hurried to the hotel. Entering the room, she found her cousin, Colonel Hale, awaiting her.

"Here is a card from a gentleman below who wants to see you," said the Colonel, handing her a card. She glanced at it and saw the name of "Josiah Hunt."

"What! he here? Why can he want to see me?"

"You had better see him," said the lawyer. "The business may be important. I had better retire."

"No; remain. I want you to hear what he has

to say." She touched a bell-button, and a moment later a boy appeared. "Show Mr. Hunt up!" said Flora. The boy bowed and left, and a few moments later the young merchant entered. His face wore the usual business-like expression. He bowed on entering, then looking at the Colonel, waited for an introduction.

"This is Colonel Hale, a relative of mine," said Flora. "Anything you have to say to me you can say in his presence."

"Well, that is plain and business-like, Miss Wells. I am here by chance, as we learned that there was a bankrupt stock here, and we thought there might be a bargain. Seeing your name on the register, I determined to call on you and do what I had determined on doing as soon as I got over that little fit of temper," and he thrust his hand in his side pocket to assure himself his scissors were safe. "That is, to apologize for my former unbusiness-like rudeness. I called on Horace yesterday, and told him all about what a beast I had made of myself. Falling into conversation with him, I was soon convinced from his tone and manner that he is innocent—"

"Thank you, Mr. Hunt! Thank you!" cried Flora, impetuously.

"And now that I am convinced that he is innocent, I will do all in my power to help him out of the scrape."

"Then find the roan horse with the black ear!" cried Flora.

"I 'll do it, by jingo; I 'll do it if I have to let

fall trade go to thunder. Business advertising will find him, and I shall do it," he declared; and bidding the attorney and Flora adieu, he hurried away to engage on his mission.

"Do you believe he is in earnest?" asked Flora.

"Yes, greatly in earnest."

"Thank Heaven. The Hunts are a power in this part of the State, and they can do much toward turning the tide of public opinion."

She started for Uncle Reuben's that evening and Colonel Hale returned home, after consulting with Mr. Hyatt, who was instructed to keep him posted, from time to time, in regard to the case. Mr. Hyatt was specially instructed to keep his eyes open for the rider of the roan horse with the black ear.

CHAPTER XXX.

A HASTY DEPARTURE.

It was night! Silently Flora passed from the old gray tavern, over the moss-grown stiles, and turned her steps toward the hill where she had been on that fatal afternoon when her lover was torn from her side. The night was fine—such a one as would win a tribute from any astronomer—the stars shone forth like gems in a setting of jet. Through the frost-browned foliage of the trees, a glimpse now and then of one of the outbuildings of the old tavern greeted the eye, and, passing to the inner consciousness, grew into strange and fantastic images, bearing no relation to commonplace objects. The trees appeared to assume human form, and when a gust of wind would gambol through their branches, they tossed their strong arms about in their defiant freedom. But the repose was seldom broken. If for a moment the wind raised its voice above a whisper, it was only to sink back into a deeper quiet, a more perfect silence.

As she gradually neared the foot of the hill, and the deep shadows of the surrounding wood fell upon her, shutting out, as it were, the feeble light of the stars, no depression, no sinking of the soul ensued,

but greater strength. Of late she had come to love that darkness and solitude which had been the terror of her childhood. There seemed more sympathy in nature than she could find in human hearts.

Mrs. Howard sympathized with her, but that mystery which had enveloped the Howards had grown so of late that she had come almost to fear her friend. That night in the old wayside inn, with the strange midnight visitor, had never left the young girl's mind. Aunt Rachel sympathized with her, but the poor old lady was illiterate, and unable to offer that consolation to the soul which must come from deeper natures to soothe such a sorrow as hers.

After all, it is God who sympathizes most with us in our afflictions. He alone can give real consolation. She seated herself on the old stump to enjoy a quiet hour. Below her, down in the lowlands, she could catch a glimpse of the stream just visible, and the long bridge across it, and thought of him whom she loved confined in that dark cell, and tears came to her eyes.

Gradually the eastern sky was lighter and the stars grew more indistinct, and the west deepened the richness of its shadows; here and there a dead tree, whose white, ghost-like arms seemed a monument of past pride and strength, seemed to have put off a dark veil, which fell back, mingling with the obscure drapery of the night. She was alone; alone with her thoughts and the rising orb. Brighter and brighter grew the sky, until at last, bursting

from the cover of trees and rocks, the moon launched forth on its unobstructed lake of heaven. Though she felt in all its force and beauty that—

"Nearer grew the moon and midnight star, and God himself more near,"

yet the sadness increased, and, strange to say, a feeling of loneliness and a sensation of pain took possession of her.

It was an excellent place and season for prayer, and with bowed head she appealed to God for strength to bear burdens greater than she alone could endure; and just as she had said "Amen," a rustling of the leaves attracted her attention. She listened and was conscious, not of the perfect silence she had before fancied, but of the restless activity of life by which she was surrounded. The air seemed alive with insects; the quick gliding of the serpent was audible, while from the covert of the forest came the soft, mellow tones of the whip-poor-will. Nature was hushed in sleep; man sleeps, but in his sleep he dreams. Perhaps the stir of life in the forest was one of nature's dreams; the mind of man is active when he dreams—why not all nature dream with ceaseless activity?

Again she relapsed into silence and reverie. Was it the shadow of an angel? Were spirits hovering around her? Hark! The distant village bell tolled the solemn hour of twelve. She dared not look up, for she beheld a shadow on the moss. A cold sweat started upon her brow as, still averting her head, she cried:

"Speak! Who or what are you?"

"Your friend," was the answer.

Flora looked up, for in the sweet tones of the clear response she recognized not the mutterings of a disembodied spirit, but the voice of Mrs. Howard. As she seated herself on the stump at Flora's side, and turned her face toward her, the girl remarked that she was paler than usual. Her hand, too, which found its way into the maiden's, trembled and was cold. She was the first to break the silence.

"So you thought a spirit stood before you when I came? I hardly knew whether to feel offended or cross. But," added she, with a glowing smile, "I think you must have been deep in thought not to have seen me sooner than you did, for I stood by you quite a long time before you seemed conscious of my presence."

"And yet," Flora answered, "I was conscious of a presence long before I spoke. But this did not alarm me, for I am often impressed with this idea. Even the shadow, so abstracted was I at first, seemed but a dimly remembered dream. Gradually, as it appealed more strongly to my outward senses, my inward consciousness awoke to the reality. Then it was, when visions of the departed came crowding to my mind, that I cried, 'Who are you?'"

"And took me for a plain, vulgar ghost," returned Mrs. Howard, smiling and shrugging her pretty shoulders.

"On the contrary," returned Flora, "by the shadow, I judged the spirit to be quite refined and natural."

Mrs. Howard gently wound her arm about Flora and whispered:

"I am pleased to find you in so much better spirits, my dear. Have you been encouraged by the last visit to Standish?"

"Yes, but I scarcely dare allow my hopes to soar. Another fall would crush out my life."

"Your cousin will assist you?"

"Yes."

"And is your lover cheerful?"

"He is happy! Oh, Mrs. Howard! you never saw such a man. There never was such another. The consciousness that my love remains with him through adversity makes him so happy that I believe he could laugh at the scaffold."

"Men know so little of women," returned Mrs. Howard, seriously, "as if adversity were not the time for a woman to show her strength. Aye, my child; the world will never judge our sex aright. Woman's love is stronger than man's laws, and we must soar or sink with those we love."

Her speech puzzled Flora, as many of her remarks had done. Mrs. Howard was almost giving expression to some strange philosophy with a hidden significance. After a few moments' silence the lady said:

"Flora, I am glad I found you out here alone, for I have something to tell you."

"What?"

"We must part soon—perhaps this very night!"

"Why?"

"I am going away."

"For how long?"

"Forever."

"Mrs. Howard, you astonish me."

"You think me mysterious," said Mrs. Howard. "My conduct must seem unnatural; but the truth is, I am so contented now I am almost happy."

"What do you mean?" asked Flora.

"My dear, it will all soon be over, and your poor friend who has borne in secret such dreadful things will be at peace. But don't ask me to explain now; I cannot." Then looking steadily at Flora for a few moments, she added: "Solemnly promise me to say nothing about this meeting, what has been said or will be said, for a week at least."

Flora promised, and she then said that a day's silence would probably be sufficient, as she would then be far from Newburg.

"Now, my dear friend," continued the mysterious lady, "you must not have too bad an opinion of us. All that you have seen of us appears strange, and I wish that I could explain; but you must excuse me. Be friendly with me during the last hour, perhaps, we shall ever spend together."

"Oh, Mrs. Howard! Why do you talk so strangely? Surely, you cannot be going—"

"I am, dear. Though the children are sleeping, they are dressed for a journey. So just try and forget what has astonished you; don't look so wonderstruck at me; imagine that this has all been arranged as a matter of business, and let us talk and enjoy the few passing moments left us. I have a favor to ask of you."

"I will grant any favor most willingly."

"It is that you change trunks with me. Mine is newer than yours, and you will gain by the transaction."

"This is a strange request."

"I cannot explain it, dear. Will you do it?"

"Certainly."

"I knew you would," returned Mrs. Howard, winding her arm about Flora's waist and leading her up the hill toward the old house. "I had hoped to remain with you until your lover was acquitted, as I trust he will be soon. I had hoped I might see you happy. I had a little day-dream of my own, but it has vanished. Man proposes and God disposes. You are not a skeptic, Floria?"

"No, Heaven forbid that I should ever doubt."

"I am glad to learn that. Cling to your religion more than to life, my dear; for it alone can comfort you when darkest troubles come."

They reached the house, and the ladies exchanged trunks. "F. Wells" was on the end of Flora's trunk, painted in black letters. She was about to erase it, when Mrs. Howard persuaded her to let it remain.

"Whenever I see it, I will think of you."

"Where are you going, Mrs. Howard?"

"I don't know."

Flora sat in a chair gazing at the friend whom she had known since her grief, and despite the mystery and suspicion that surrounded her, regretted to have her go. A tear came in her eye, but Mrs. Howard kissed it away, saying:

"Don't, child! Be brave for my sake. You know not—God grant you may never know what this heart has to bear. Don't add to it with your grief."

"Shall I ever see you again?"

"When two separate in this world, it may be years before they meet, perhaps never," she answered.

"Will you write to me?"

"I doubt if I can. Now, my child, I have only one request to make, and that is that you forget me. Forget that you ever saw me."

"I cannot."

"Try."

"If you really wish it, I will."

"Now, dear, I will go, but first promise me that whatever noise you may hear—of departure—you will not leave your room. Uncle Reuben has been paid several weeks in advance, so he will lose nothing. If you hear some one at my door, if you hear my trunk being carried out, say nothing, and, as you love me, do not leave your room. Do you promise?"

"Yes."

"Now, dear, farewell!" She placed her arms around her neck and kissed her again and again. For a moment Flora clung to her, then holding her hands in her own, gazed into the pale, mysterious yet beautiful face, and said:

"Permit me to ask you one question. Is your name Howard?"

"No."

She left the room, closing the door after her. Flora could hear her softly moving about, packing her trunks. Overcome with amazement, she sat by the bed trying to solve the mystery of this strange family, when she heard the sound of wheels without. They stopped at the stiles, and on glancing from her window she saw a close carriage, something rarely seen at Newburg. A man sprang from it and lightly ran to the old house. By the moonlight she recognized him as Mr. Howard. He rapped on the door, and a moment later Mrs. Howard tripped down the stairs and softly opened it.

"Are you ready?" he whispered.

"Yes."

He beckoned to the coachman, who ran quickly across the yard, and all three flew noiselessly up the stairs. A moment later she heard the children crying and complaining at being disturbed, and the parents soothing them with such words of affection as parents only can use. All hurried downstairs. Mr. and Mrs. Howard carried the children, and the driver the trunk, which he placed on the carriage seat at his side. The family took their places in the carriage, and all drove away. So quietly was it all transacted that not a member of the Newburg tavern, save Flora, knew it.

Next morning, when Aunt Rachel rang the bell for breakfast, only Flora appeared.

"Where is Mrs. Howard?" she asked.

"She is gone."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"I don't know."

"When did she go?"

"Last night."

"How?"

Flora explained the mysterious manner in which the Howards had suddenly taken their departure, and Aunt Rachel said:

"Land sakes alive, don't it beat all! Well, she told me she was goin' soon; but their board is paid some weeks ahead, so it's all right if it suits them."

At breakfast she told Uncle Reuben, who was never astonished at anything. He only remarked:

"Mighty queer people, anyhow. Come when no one expects 'em, and leaves th' same way."

"Well, Rube, Missus Howard seemed like a mighty nice woman."

Nothing more was said on the subject until near noon, when two horsemen rode up to the stiles, and, dismounting, came to Uncle Reuben, who sat on the porch smoking his pipe.

"Are you Mr. Reuben Price?" asked one of them.

"Yes, sir."

"Does Mrs. Howard stay here?"

"No."

"What? Didn't she stop here?"

"Yes."

"When did she leave?"

"Last night."

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know. I was asleep when she left, and she never left any word for me."

"Left in the night? And don't any of you know where she went?"

"We don't. Her man, or a man she called her man, came after her, an' she went off, an' I don't know nuthin' about 'em."

"Foiled again, Snuffer," growled the horseman, to his companion.

Snuffer growled out some unintelligible words, then they returned to their horses, and mounting, galloped away. But if their mission was to find the Howards it was evidently a failure, for they had disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed them up.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ARTHUR TELLS ALL.

When one forms a good resolution, the next thing is to put it in execution. That is not always the easiest thing in the world to do, as Arthur Westfall discovered. He had determined to thwart the banditti if it cost him his life, and yet, after all, life and liberty are sweet. He could expect nothing less than a long term of penal servitude, and the tempter, who had not wholly deserted him, kept whispering in his ear:

"Why throw away this chance to get a fortune? Fool, do you prefer a dungeon and chains to fortune and liberty?"

But Arthur had learned that a fortune with a guilty conscience could not be enjoyed, and vowed to do what was right, whatever might come of it. General Hawley was at the bank next day, but looked so pale and careworn that he hardly dared mention the subject to him even if an opportunity had offered itself. He heard the banker ask the cashier:

"How goes everything, Meeker?"

"Very well, very well, General."

"I knew it would. How thankful an old, worn-

out fellow like me should feel to have some one that can be trusted."

"You have always found that you could trust me, General?" responded Meeker, with a hypocritical smile.

"Yes, Calvin, it would take a great deal to shake my faith in you."

This answer presented a new difficulty to Arthur's mind. Perhaps he could not make General Hawley believe his story, and then he would have imprisonment, or death, at the hand of the assassin for his pains. Would the General discard an old and tried friend for one who must admit that he was a thief sent for the purpose of robbery and murder? This was a question worthy of serious consideration. Again the tempter came to point out only arrest and death as a traitor, even if he tried to reform. But he had come to know the devil now, and had the courage to say:

"Get thee behind me, Satan."

His good angel whispered: It was only death in the end, anyway, and that death in the effort to do right was glorious. Yes, he would do right, even if he perished. It seemed as if an opportunity to warn the General would never come. He frequently went to the Hawley mansion on one pretext or another, but the banker was always away. He met Grace and her mother. He had delightful *tête-à-têtes* with Grace, and became more and more infatuated with her manner. His love became a passion bordering onto madness, and had he believed himself an honest man, would have proposed,

notwithstanding their difference in station. Poor Arthur! he was like one starving in the midst of plenty.

The awful fate that was in store for him did not prevent his love growing stronger with every glance from those dark eyes, and every smile that displayed those beautiful teeth. Often when they were together he found himself speaking in low, tender tones, to which she responded with blushes that made her neck and face crimson. That his love was returned he could hardly doubt, though the very fact was maddening to him. He became nervous, restless, and his eyes were seldom closed in slumber. Sleep was more miserable than his waking hours, for he was haunted by the most miserable dreams, in which masked outlaws were threatening the life of the being he loved. The crisis was coming; this must all end some way soon or he would go mad.

One day he heard General Hawley tell the cashier that the State funds would arrive in a fortnight. Only two weeks left to work, with so much to do, and so much caution necessary in accomplishing it. The bank was closed for the day, and he was walking down the lane, his favorite promenade, praying Heaven to point out some course whereby he might thwart the robbers and save the banker. He could not find a single second to speak with General Hawley. The cashier seemed ever on the watch when the General was around, and carefully studied to keep them apart. He was thinking all this over, and praying Heaven for strength and

wisdom, when a footstep startled him, and looking up, he saw General Hawley.

"Hello, George, my boy! Taking a bit of exercise? That is well; I enjoy a walk myself when the weather is fair."

Arthur seized the banker's hand and glanced about to see that no one was within earshot. Now or never was the time to strike the blow that would crush the hopes of the banditti.

"General Hawley," Arthur whispered in a voice hoarse with earnestness, "you have been a father to me, and I would die for you." The banker opened his eyes in astonishment. "Don't look so surprised. I want to tell you something, but not here. It must be where no eye can see us and no ear save yours hear. Now be perfectly cool. Go home and say not a word about it to a living soul, but send a messenger for me to come to your house on a matter of business about the bank, so there can be no suspicion. If I should go of my own accord, suspicion would be aroused, for both you and I are watched."

"Why, George! What does this mean?"

"That 's what I want to tell you, but I can't tell you here. Do as I say, and don't believe me suddenly gone mad, for I am as sane as you."

"Well, as Hamlet's mother said, 'if this is madness, there is method in it.'"

"I will prove to you that there is method in it, but we must not even be seen walking together. Go home, and as soon as you have had your tea send for me. I will be at my room in the hotel,

and will come at once. You must give me an audience alone. For the love of Heaven, your life and family, be calm and say not a word to any one of this."

General Hawley was a man of much nerve and coolness, but the manner of the bookkeeper almost upset him. As he walked homeward with a corrugated brow, he kept thinking:

"Can this young fellow have lost his senses? Is it possible he has suddenly gone mad? No, by Jove, he doesn't look as if he was, yet he talks as though some terrible conspiracy was about to ruin the country."

Arthur tried to be cool and appear unconcerned. He had commenced the work, and called into use all his wonderful self-command. He went to supper, but did not linger long at the table. He had scarcely reached his room when a messenger from the Hawley mansion came with a note summoning him to the banker's presence at once. He was leaving the hotel when he met Meeker.

"Hello, my friend! Going for a stroll?" said Meeker. "That suits me; we will go together." Then he whispered: "The chief wants to see you to-night."

"I can't go."

"Why?"

For answer he gave him the note. Meeker read it, and a frown came over his face.

"What can the old cuss want with you?"

"The note does not say, and I have no means of knowing. Nevertheless, I must obey it, or I shall

incur his anger, perhaps suspicion, and be discharged. It might ruin all to refuse to obey this summons, so explain matters and excuse me to the chief."

They strolled into an almost deserted street, and were speaking in whispers.

"Yes, we will have to let you off to-night; but, George, has he any suspicion that something is wrong with the books?"

"No-"

"He never mentions it?"

"Never."

"If he should come to suspect me, the jig would be up."

"I know he has the utmost confidence in you. But let me hasten to him and allay any suspicion he may have, if he has any."

He got away from Meeker and walked rapidly to the mansion. He did not meet Grace this time. She usually managed to meet him in the hall, but on this occasion he did not see her. The old banker was alone in his study, and his face wore a perplexed look.

"Well, George, my boy, you have puzzled me. I don't know whether you have suddenly gone mad or discovered some great conspiracy that is about to upset the Government."

"It's a conspiracy, General Hawley," said Arthur, coolly. "Though it does not threaten the nation, it does threaten you."

"What is it?"

"Are we quite alone?"

"Yes."

"No one can eavesdrop us?"

"No."

"General Hawley, are your nerves strong? Can you listen to a story far more thrilling than any blood-and-thunder novel?"

"Yes, go on."

"I am going to commence by giving you a history of a part of my life, for it concerns you, so don't interrupt me."

He proceeded briefly to narrate his early life, and how he was placed in the store of Mark Hunt to earn a living; of the false accusation; his hopeless tramping and starving in search of work, and finally meeting the stranger Jackson, in Kansas City, who persuaded him to join the banditti. The banker, despite his promises, could not refrain from frequent interjections of wonder. When he told of the train robbery, and his only larceny, the letter—giving it to the banker to read, in proof of what he said—the General's amazement increased. Then he told how he had saved his daughter from the villain's knife, and produced the handkerchief she had given him, stained with her blood. The General grasped his hand, and cried:

"Heaven! Was it you who saved my child?"

"Silence, General Hawley! The wonder is coming."

He then told him that Meeker, short in his accounts, and angry because Grace had declined his hand, had, through a friend of the bandit chief, laid a plan to rob the bank, and that the former

bookkeeper had been sent away, and he given the place, in order to help the nefarious scheme. After having made a "clean breast" of everything, and noted the increasing amazement and interest of the banker, he concluded with:

"Now, General Hawley, this revelation may seem unreal, but I swear that every word of it is true. I do not know how I can make you believe me. A bandit, sent to rob and perhaps murder you, can hardly be expected to be more honest or truthful than one whom you have always believed to be honorable and trustworthy; but I have resolved, with the help of God, to do my duty and take the consequences. My life is forfeited, whatever the consequences may be. Even if the Missouri banditti are thwarted, slain or captured, they have friends who will avenge them. You can hardly realize what a power they are, and that they have friends in high places who shelter and protect them, and others who will avenge them."

"They sha'n't harm a hair of your head!" cried the impetuous old banker. "When a young fellow has determined to do the right, with all the temptations that are thrown around him, he is not going to be touched by these cowardly robbers. But this thing amazes, shocks me. Meeker a rascal! Wife and Grace always said he was. I thought it was only their prejudice against him."

"Their knowledge of human nature has proven keener than yours. Perhaps you form your judgment of the man from outward appearances, while they read the heart."

"What are we to do?" asked the General, after taking a few turns across the room.

"We must frustrate the robbers."

"But how?"

"Whom can you trust with this secret?"

"I don't know. Yes—there is Colonel Hale, the lawyer. He is my legal adviser."

"You might consult with him, if you are quite sure that he will keep it. But I would advise you to go to Chicago and bring some of the keenest detectives in that city to help plan for the capture of the band."

"I can't go; the bank may be robbed meanwhile."

"No; nothing will be done until the State funds arrive. You have plenty of time."

"Yes, yes; but I am all flustered. It seems hard to believe Meeker that kind of a man."

"Bring your detectives and set them to shadowing Meeker and myself, and you will find it true. I will know soon when the robbery is to be committed. I will meet the chief, learn his plan, and you can have your officers stationed about the bank to kill or arrest the robbers. If no attempt is made to rob the bank; if Meeker should be innocent and I insane or trying to malign him, he need never know that you suspected him."

General Hawley decided to take Arthur's advice and prepare to defend his bank.

"Now, my boy," said the banker, who had grown more cool and collected, "let me take that letter from Cravensford and lock it in my private safe.

When this is all over it may prove a mascot for you."

"It will make but little difference to me what it proves," said Arthur, handing him the letter. "The least I can hope for is a life sentence in the penitentiary. I once had ambitious dreams, but all that is over now."

"Don't despair, my boy. While there is life there is hope."

"I have counted everything," Arthur answered. "I know it is death anyway, and I have resolved to die for the right. It would be pleasant to die for you, and—and—"

"Who?"

"Your daughter." An expression of alarm and pain swept over the banker's face; he gasped for breath and half started from his seat, and Arthur added: "Do not alarm yourself, General. She shall never know how I feel in this matter. I understand my position, and shall not leave my proper place."

He left the house, and the General buried his face in his hands and gave utterance to a groan.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE LAST CONSULTATION.

Despite all his efforts to be calm, Arthur found himself trembling next morning when he went to his desk. Meeker was in the bank almost as soon as himself. General Hawley did not come until an hour or two later, and the bookkeeper watched him with great anxiety. He tried hard to read his thoughts, but the General was outwardly calm. Arthur would not have suspected that he knew anything of the conspiracy, if he had not told him the night before. One thing was marked on the part of the banker, and that was his treatment of Meeker. He kept aloof from him, and spent most of his time in his private office.

It was late in the day when Arthur heard the cashier and the president talking. A few moments later the General took his departure, and Meeker came to Arthur's side, and in a low tone said :

"What's got into the old man? He's going to Chicago."

"I can't say. Does he often go to Chicago?"

"Not of late years."

"Did he give any reason for going?"

"Some private business of his own."

Meeker seemed very much put out, and gave vent to an expression very much like an oath, as he turned away. Arthur called him back, and asked:

"Did you see the chief last night?"

"Yes."

"What did you learn of him?"

"He was very angry at you."

"Why?"

"For failing to meet him. He swore he would teach you to obey orders."

"But if I had gone as he directed, I would have spoiled everything. General Hawley would have had his suspicions aroused, and I would have been discharged. Didn't you explain this to the chief?"

"Yes, but it did not satisfy him. He is not pleased with the way you have been acting."

"I am sorry. I was guided by my best judgment and discretion."

Meeker went away with a frown on his face. That Meeker was jealous and suspicious of him, Arthur did not doubt, and during the day the cashier's sullenness caused him uneasiness. He feared that he was putting his recent visit to the General and the latter's sudden journey to Chicago together, and was drawing a conclusion that might thwart his designs. After closing, Arthur went to his room at the hotel. He had not been alone a great while when he was startled by a tap at his door. He rose and opened it, and admitted Meeker.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Yes, I am always alone when not at the bank."

"He has gone."

"The General?"

"Yes, he has gone to Chicago, but what the deuce he went for puzzles me."

"Did he make no explanation?"

"Said something about a real-estate deal."

"When did he say he would be back?" asked Arthur, who, now that he had the lead in asking questions, determined to hold that position.

"In two or three days."

"Then he will come back before the State funds arrive?"

"Yes."

"When will the chief come again?"

"In a few days; Bob will let me know."

"I want to see him then."

"You had better see him and try to set matters aright. There is another thing I want you to bear in mind, and that is to keep away from the Hawley mansion."

"I will not go unless on urgent business, or sent for."

"You will not be sent for."

They then discussed the State funds, and how the banditti would carry away the money.

"I hope the State Treasurer will not send much silver," said the cashier. "Silver is bulky and heavy. Paper is much better."

"Yes, but they will manage to lug it away."

"How do they carry it?"

"In bags slung across their horses," answered Arthur.

"Did you ever assist to rob a bank?" asked the cashier, nervously.

"No, but I have heard them explain how it was done."

"How long have you been with them?" asked the cashier.

"It will soon be four months."

"And do you propose to quit?"

"I have not fully made up my mind. Some seem to think that we will make so much out of this affair that we can all retire from business; but I have given the matter no thought yet."

"I wish the thing was over," said Meeker, in a hoarse whisper, while he fidgeted uneasily in his chair. "I am getting deucedly nervous."

"Why should you be nervous? You are not expected to have anything to do with the robbery."

"No, but some wretched blunder, slip or mishap might make it all miscarry, and then I would be in a fix."

"No worse than I," answered Arthur, coolly, "and yet I am not growing nervous. In our position one takes his life in his hand, and must be prepared for anything."

"But you don't occupy my position in society. The fall, the disgrace, is something."

"Prison bars, a bullet or a rope level all ranks of society, Mr. Meeker. But let us not look on the dark side of the picture."

"You are right. It is unwise and foolish to do

so, and we shall not. I am going now, and will try to be more cheerful in the future."

Three days later General Hawley returned, and was in the bank as if nothing had happened. The reader will remember that Col. John W. Hale's office was over the bank, and Colonel Hale was the legal adviser of the banker. He frequently went to his office to consult with him on legal points in his business, and while he was in the private office of Colonel Hale, discussing the proposed robbery, he excited no suspicion from any one. Even Arthur, who lived in constant expectancy, did not know that four of Chicago's keenest detectives were in the city. Those plain, business-looking men, who were seen so often going to and coming from Colonel Hale's office, were supposed to be clients. When the whole plan had been laid out to Colonel Hale by the General, and he learned that one of the band had become penitent, and had determined to betray them, he thought that perhaps he would be able to gain some evidence from him that would aid in the defense of Horace Rathburne, for he did not doubt that this was the same band that robbed the Standish Bank. But he resolved to say nothing about it to him until the banditti had been captured.

Arthur hoped the banker had done something to prevent the robbery, but day after day went by, and the time for the arrival of the State funds drew frightfully near, and he heard nothing nor saw a sign of defense. Sometimes in his desperation he was on the eve of running away and leav-

ing the banker and his enemies to fight their own battles, especially as the General seemed not to heed his warning. But at such moments the great dark, soulful eyes of Grace seemed gazing on him in sad reproval, and he determined, come what might, he would remain and defend the bank alone and single-handed.

It was the Tuesday before the State funds were to arrive on Thursday, and he was just closing up his books for the day, when Meeker whispered:

"Wait until the others are gone!"

"You have something to say?"

"Yes."

The bookkeeper opened the ledger again and began going over its pages, as if something had been neglected. General Hawley suddenly came into the bank on pretense of having forgotten something in his private office. He paused a moment at Arthur's desk, as if to speak with him, and showed him a card on which was written:

"*All is well; report as soon as there are any new developments.*"

Arthur read, nodded, and the General, crushing the card in his hand, entered his private office and destroyed it. Arthur did not look up from his ledger, but resolved to have a talk with the General before the dawn of another day. General Hawley was in his private office but a moment, and then passing through the bank, went out on the street. As soon as all had gone from the building, the cashier came to the side of the bookkeeper and said;

"Now that they are all gone, I want to tell you that there is to be a consultation to-night."

"At the old mill?"

"No. We don't dare meet there any more. It might attract attention. I will come to your hotel for you."

"What time will you call?"

"Between nine and ten o'clock to-night."

"I will be in my room."

Arthur then closed his ledger, locked his desk, and went to the hotel. After supper he went to his room to wait for the cashier. It still lacked three-quarters of an hour to the time for Meeker to come, when there came a tap at his door, and opening it, he saw a new arrival at the hotel, who occupied the room opposite him.

"Will you please give me a match?" he asked. "I have none to light my gas."

"Certainly." Turning to the low mantel, he took some matches from a little ornamented match-safe and handed them to the man, who stood in his door. He took the matches, and thrusting them in his pocket, still remained in the doorway, as if anxious to form an acquaintance.

"Do you live in Starkeville?" he asked.

"Yes," Arthur answered. The town was as much his home as any place.

"I am a stranger here, but I like the town. Are you in business?"

"I am the bookkeeper of the Hawley Bank."

"An excellent position. You are lucky to have it. If you had to travel as we poor fellows do, and

depend on commissions on sales, you would learn what it is to hustle."

"You are a commercial traveller?"

"Yes."

"How long since you came?"

"Three days. I 'm not through yet, and I shall probably be here two or three days more. My room is right across the hall from yours; come in and get acquainted."

Arthur thanked him for the invitation, and the stranger retired, closing the door after him. In a short time Mr. Meeker came in, and said:

"Are you ready?"

"How far have we to go?"

"Some distance."

"I am ready."

He donned his hat and followed Meeker down the stairs to the street. He had hardly disappeared from the hall when the door suddenly opened, and the gentleman who had borrowed the matches, who gave his name as Nicholas Burton, emerged, dressed for a walk, and skipped down the stairway after them.

Meeker took Arthur's arm and hurried him along, saying:

"We will have to walk some distance before we reach the conveyance that is going to take us."

They were soon in the western suburbs of the town, hurrying along a dark lane. At the end of the lane they came to a dense wood with paths diverging from the mouth of the lane in different

directions. Some were plain and well-travelled, while others were dim, and bore little evidence of travel in later years. They turned into a dim path leading off to the left, and followed it for some distance, when they found a man with a team waiting for them. It was a span of bay horses hitched to a lumber wagon, and Bob Maddox sat in the driver's seat holding the whip and reins in his hands.

"Jump in an' let's be goin'," he said.

They climbed in, and the great, lumbering old vehicle started away at a tremendous speed over the rough road. After devious turns, the path finally brought them to an old log-hut standing in the forest, which had evidently been deserted for years. A light gleaming faintly from one of the windows could be seen two or three hundred paces away. They had just come within sight of the hut, when a man stepped from the dark shadow of a tree, and said :

"Stop !"

"We 're all right !"

"That you, Bob ?"

"Yes ; an' here's a pal an' th' sly cove frum Hawley's bank."

"All right, go on. He's waitin' at th' cabin."

The wagon rolled up to the cabin, where Meeker and Arthur climbed out and went in. The chief and two or three men were waiting for them.

"You come this time," said Jackson, with lowering brow.

"Yes, I would have come before if—"

"No explanations, sir. My eye is never off you,

and you cannot even think without my knowing your thoughts. Sit down."

Arthur felt very much as if he was taking his place on the scaffold when he sat in the chair. He shuddered, for he half believed the man really knew his thoughts. The bandit chief turned to Meeker and asked:

"Do you know for certain when the State funds will come?"

"Thursday."

"Thursday, and this is Tuesday," said the bandit chief. "We shall have to hurry matters or we shall not be ready by Friday, and it must be done Friday. Devilish unlucky day, though."

"Could you not put it off until Saturday?" asked Meeker.

"It will be sure to come on Thursday?"

"Certain."

"Then we can't delay an hour longer than Friday. At half-past three, Friday afternoon, you can expect the fun to commence. If old Hawley is in the bank and resists we will shoot him as we would a wolf. The scoundrel has offered several rewards for us, dead or alive, and we have 'a crow to pick with him' anyway."

Arthur sat gazing at the rascals, deciding in his own mind that Meeker was the greatest knave of all. The chief at last turned his eyes on the bookkeeper and said:

"Well, sir, I learn that you have been playing the gallant in Starkeville. You have carried your flirtation with the banker's daughter too far."

"How can I help it?"

"You must not go with her any more."

"But if I should suddenly change my manner, suspicion would be aroused."

"Between this and Friday, you can find excuses to keep you in the bank. If you are seen in her company again, no matter what the pretext, from some dark corner a bullet or knife-thrust will put an end to your illustrious career. I hope you understand me."

Arthur, assured that they knew nothing of what had been done, whatever their suspicions might be, assuming a look of injured innocence, said:

"What have I done to make you so suspicious?"

"Nothing. You could do nothing without my knowledge. If you had gone far astray, you would have been wearing a wooden suit* long ere this, for we take no risks."

He became more at his ease, for he saw they were entirely off the track, and entered into the discussion of the proposed robbery with a zeal that deceived even the man calling himself Jackson, with all his boasted cunning. Jackson, the chief, asked many questions about the building, and who occupied the offices above. Then he gave Arthur and Meeker their final instructions. Meeker was to have all the cash within easy reach. He was to make a pretended resistance, but it was arranged that Arthur was to seize and bind him, and after assisting the two men who were to enter the bank

* A coffin.

to gather up the money, was to make his escape with them.

"On Friday afternoon, at half-past three, not ten minutes sooner or later, it will be done," said the chief at parting. "Until then, adieu."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BAFFLED.

The night was quite dark, but Bob Maddox was well acquainted with the woods, and drove back to town at a rate of speed that Jehu might have envied. Arthur and Meeker were set out in the suburbs, and the bookkeeper walked to his hotel alone. He knew he had been watched, and would be watched, but determined at all risks to communicate with General Hawley. He dared not write to him; he knew it would be fatal to approach the house by daylight, so he decided to go there that night. To his joy, the night became intensely dark.

At four in the morning the heavy fog had become a dense cloud, and a light mist like rain was falling. The tardy moon had risen, but its glory was veiled by mist and cloud.

Arthur rose, and locking the door, put the key in his pocket, then arming himself with a pair of reliable revolvers, went to the window, raised it, and by the aid of a rope with which he had taken the precaution to provide himself, climbed down to the shed roof below. He crept along the shed roof to the eaves, where there was a ladder, and climbed down into the back yard. More like an escaping thief than a man trying to do a noble deed, he scaled the wall, and hurried up an alley to the great mansion on the hill.

He paused frequently on the way to listen and look, for he had every reason to believe that he was watched. At last the home of General Hawley was reached; but now came the great difficulty. How was he to gain admission, or, what was more difficult, arouse General Hawley, without waking the household? No doubt spies were at that moment watching the house. He knew where General Hawley's room was located. It was on the second floor in the rear, and a fire-escape led to the window. He found the foot of the iron ladder, and climbing to the window, tapped lightly on the glass with his fingers. The first tap drew no response, so he rapped again louder than before, and was rewarded by hearing a heavy footfall within. A voice said in a whisper:

"Who is there?"

"General Hawley, is it you?"

"Yes."

"I want to see you. I am your bookkeeper."

"Can you enter at the rear, unseen by any watcher?"

"I believe so. I have met no one yet."

"I will be down in a moment and open the door."

Arthur crept noiselessly down the fire-escape, and a moment later was admitted at the rear hall door. It was so dark he could not see the person who admitted him.

"Give me your hand," whispered the General; and taking his hand, he led him through perfect darkness to the General's study. The blinds were closed and the curtains down, so the banker lighted the gas, without fear of being seen. "Well, boy, you have something of importance to tell me?"

"Yes, sir; the day for the robbery is fixed."

"When was it fixed?"

"To-night, and all the plans are laid."

"You left town with Meeker?"

"We went together to the consultation."

"Yes, one of our men shadowed you to the wagon, but was unable to keep up with you further."

"One of your detectives from Chicago?"

"Yes."

"How many have you here?"

"Four."

"It is not enough."

"We will have local help when the time comes."

"One of your men is at the hotel."

"How do you know?"

"I gave him some matches to-night. Is any one guarding your premises?"

"Yes."

"I fear he has gone to sleep at his post. At any

rate, I did not meet him. But let us to business, for I must return in a few moments. Have you arranged your plan of action?"

"Yes. Four men are to be in Hale's office over the bank. Hale and one man will come to my private office, and we will be there when the fun begins. There is a back stair from Hale's office to the bank, and the other three will be on that stair, ready to rush in. The sheriff and two deputies will be in Cole's hardware store, just across the street. Two more deputies will be in Clark & Barnard's dry goods store, at the side of the bank building, while the constable and six men on horseback will be in Sam Miller's livery stable, and at the first alarm will charge on the scene."

"The plan of defense certainly could not be better," declared Arthur.

"There will be hot work there, my boy. Colonel Hale and I have fought in many a battle, and we are not too old to draw the sword again."

"General," said the young man, taking his hand and looking him in the face, "don't you believe now that I told you the truth?"

"I know it, my boy. I confess that I was staggered at first when you told me of Meeker, but I cannot question you now. No, boy, I doubt neither your truthfulness nor honesty. Be brave to the last, and you will come out all right. There is going to be a scrimmage, but I would rather have Meeker taken unharmed if it can be done."

"It can. It is a part of the programme that I am to bind him, in order to make you all believe

he is innocent. If I could arrange to have a pair of handcuffs in my room, I would iron him."

"They will be under your pillow to-morrow night."

"Then all is understood. Remember, Friday afternoon at three-thirty!"

General Hawley smiled and nodded. He was not liable to forget it. Arthur took his departure, crept back unseen to his room, went to bed and in a few moments was sound asleep.

Arthur noticed next morning that Meeker was a little pale and nervous. The bookkeeper worked at his ledger in earnest, for he determined to show up all the scoundrel's defalcations. He did not speak to Meeker during the day, but after he had gone to his room that night and was in the act of retiring, he heard a nervous tread in the hall, then a light tap on the door.

"Come in," he said.

It was Meeker. His white face seemed greatly agitated.

"How do you feel, Arthur? I am as nervous as the deuce."

"You show it," said Arthur coolly. "You must be careful or you will betray yourself."

"I wish I was like you, my lad. I wish I could be cool and unconcerned. Your nerves must be of steel."

"It is not prudent for us to be seen much together."

"No, no, but I must talk with you to-night. Do you suppose the State funds will reach here to-

morrow? A balk now would ruin all. Was there no signal agreed upon between you and the chief whereby you was to communicate to him the fact as he entered the town?"

"Yes, I was to lay a red silk handkerchief on my desk by the window, if the funds had come. Don't fail to do your part."

"I will not. Have no fears but that I will be cool enough when the time comes, but just now I feel a kind of an all-overishness that upsets me quite."

"Perhaps you do not sleep soundly."

"Sleep? Heavens, I have not slept for a week, and don't expect to, until this business is over. It is a terrible thing to sell one's self to Satan, and that is about what we have done. But we are in too far to back out now."

"Would you back out if you could?"

"No," after a short silence. "I am playing for a big stake, and I must win. I'll tell you a secret, my boy, now that our fates are so closely linked, which I would not have told otherwise. Five years ago, when I became cashier of this bank, Grace Hawley was nothing but a child, but I saw she would develop into a glorious woman, and I determined to work myself into the good graces of the banker, gain his favor, and win his daughter while she was yet young and her affection tender. This desire increased as she budded into a most beautiful woman, and I came to love her—yes, I swear that I loved her. It would not have made any difference if I had not, for it was the bank I had

started to win, and not a wife. From the first I fancied that she did not like me, though I lavished costly presents on her, which were often returned. Meanwhile I had created a fondness for speculation, and spent so much more money than my salary that I began to draw out of the bank, and by threats and entreaties induced the bookkeeper not to report my deficit, until I had a chance to save myself by marrying the banker's daughter.

"At last I proposed, and was rejected. It made a demon out of me, to think that my only hope of safety was gone, and then I fell upon this scheme. By it I hope not only to save myself but to be revenged on her."

Arthur could hardly resist the temptation to rise and kick him from the room, but policy induced him to keep his temper and restrain his inclinations. After urging him to go home and get a night's rest, he bade him good night at the door, which he closed and locked after him, and prepared to turn in to sleep. He felt some hard substance under his pillow, and on laying it back discovered a pair of handcuffs. With a smile, he said:

"General Hawley forgets nothing."

He placed the handcuffs in his coat pocket and next day concealed them in his desk at the bank.

On Thursday the State funds arrived. Of course, their arrival was kept a secret. The cashier, clerks and bookkeeper were kept busy all day counting, recording and receipting for the amounts.

Friday came at last. Mr. Meeker was almost as pale as a ghost, and his hand shook as if he could

scarcely transact the ordinary business that came in his line. He made half-a-dozen mistakes during the day, and at last getting a chance to speak with Arthur unobserved, he whispered:

"I could not stand this another day. I wish it was over with."

It was twenty-five minutes after three, when the people on the streets saw two strange horsemen riding into town from the east. They wore straw hats and long ulsters, and had the appearance of farmers. Their presence, of course, attracted little attention. Three more, similarly attired, came from the north, and two from the west. There came others, making nine in all, with ten horses, for one man was riding one horse and leading another, which had a saddle on its back, at his side.

Some one on the street wondered who all "them fellers" were, and what they were "up to."

Arthur was at his desk near the window. He had dropped a red silk handkerchief over the side of the desk so that its folds spread down, covering almost one pane of glass in the window.

The employees afterward remembered that Mr. Meeker had shown strong evidences of nervousness that afternoon. He was seen to cast frequent glances at the great clock and compare it with his watch, as if he had an important engagement, which must be met at the exact moment. From his window Arthur had a good view of the street. He saw two horsemen ride up to the crossing and stop. Despite his disguise, he recognized one as Jackson, his chief.

At this moment General Hawley, Colonel Hale and a stranger entered the bank from the front door.

"Come into my office and I will show you the papers," said the General, and they hurried into his private office, closed the door after them, threw off their coats and grasped a weapon in each hand. Arthur had a revolver in his hip-pocket and two more in his desk, and he was as cool as a veteran going into battle.

Suddenly there rose a yell on the air. Two horsemen galloped right up to the front of the bank building, flung themselves from their horses and leaped in at the door, yelling:

"Throw up your hands—throw up your hands!" flourishing large revolvers in the air to enforce their commands. The clerk shrieked in fright and fled.

"Tie me!" whispered Meeker, rushing to Arthur, who dropped his pen and seized the handcuffs. At this moment the door of the General's office opened, and three men leaped into the bank. Three more came in from the rear.

There was a rattling crash of firearms, and the air was darkened with smoke, and all was confusion. The two bandits who had started into the building sank lifeless in the great doorway.

"Sit down!" said Arthur, sternly, to the cashier, forcing his hands behind his back, handcuffing him in that position and fastening him to the chair so he could not move.

"Heavens, Arthur! what does this mean?

Where did all those fellows come from?" whined Meeker.

"Keep still!" cried Arthur, seizing his pistols and firing shot after shot through the window at the banditti on the street. Pandemonium reigned. Armed men seemed to spring up from the ground everywhere. The sheriff and all his deputies rushed to the scene, pouring in volley after volley, while there came a troop of cavalry at a charge from Miller's livery-stable, pouring a stream of fire and death at the banditti. The would-be robbers were taken completely by surprise and were thoroughly demoralized. Two men lay dead in the doorway and another in the street. Four horses had been shot down and three more were wounded. They fled, leaving their dead and one prisoner behind.

Colonel Hale gazed on the face of the man who had fallen in the street a moment, and his face seemed to light with a sudden thought. He tore off the false beard and wig, dragged the body to a lamp-post and leaned it against it in a half-sitting and half-reclining position, and then sent for a photographer, while he stood guard over the dead bandit. The photographer came and made a negative of the dead bandit.

"What does this mean, Arthur? Take these off!" said Meeker, when all was over.

"No, I will turn you over to the sheriff."

The cashier, for the first time, began to realize the truth, and gazing hard at the young man, he said:

"You have betrayed me, have you?"

"You are a prisoner, Mr. Meeker."

"And you?"

"I shall give myself up to the sheriff and confess all."

"*Fool!* This will cost you your life!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BEGINNING OF HORACE'S TRIAL.

"*Oyez! Oyez! The honorable Circuit Court of —— County, State of Missouri, is now in session,*" cried the court bailiff, a man with a bullet head, short chin whiskers and two front teeth gone. There was a momentary hush in the Standish court-room, which was crowded to the very door. The spectators surged forward like a swelling tide to the thin rail that separated the bar from the others. The bar was filled with lawyers of every description. There were tall lawyers, short lawyers, thin lawyers and stout lawyers. Lawyers with bald heads, and lawyers possessing a superabundance of hair, of every shade, from sunny youth to the white frosts of winter; all bustling about within their narrow pen called the bar. Some looked grave and serious,

and some were smiling and pleasant. One was finishing in a whisper a joke, which he had begun aloud before Court opened. The Judge, a small man of sixty, with smooth-shaven face and hair nearly white, had just entered at a side door and taken his seat. He had a pleasant face, and looked like an intelligent man. He was set somewhat deep in his shirt collar, as if his head and his heart were near enough to hold easy communication.

There, within the bar, at the side of a long table, sat Colonel Hale, examining some legal papers. All the attorneys knew him, for he frequently had business at the Standish Circuit Court. Mr. Hyatt was at his side, and they were discussing some point in a whisper. At the end of the long table sat Crompton, the Prosecuting Attorney (for so the State's attorney in Missouri is called). Before him was a pile of papers which he had been examining, but after Court opened he leaned back in his chair, rubbed his hands, pale in their morning whiteness, while with his hawk-like eyes he cast furtive glances at the Judge and Colonel Hale. All the time his scalp was moving backward and forward as if he had just procured a new one, a trifle too large, but that might be filled up before night. All the time there was a subtle scorn upon his lips, the flavor of which the finely curved nose apprehended with approval.

Crompton was a keen prosecutor and as relentless as a bloodhound. He was regarded as one of the most difficult of all lawyers to unhorse in a case. On this morning, with his uneasy scalp, his white

hands, his scornful lips and his thin, twitching nostrils, he looked the very impersonation of impatience and contempt. If the whole Court had been thronged with vermin, instead of human beings, among which he was compelled to sit, he could not have appeared more disgusted.

Quite retired among the audience, and deeply veiled, sat Flora Wells, with Aunt Rachel, who had been persuaded once more to risk her life on the cars, sitting at her side. An important case was to be tried that day in which the whole country for many miles around was interested. This accounted for the court-room being so densely packed.

People came from far and near, and had the court-room been four times as large, it could not have possibly held the throng. Among those attracted to the scene were Mr. and Mrs. Wells, from Wellsville. It was not a desire to witness a sensational trial that brought these good people to Standish, but a rumor which at the last moment reached their ears that their daughter was to be at the trial and sit by the criminal's side. This disgrace, in addition to the publicity Flora had already gained, was too much for Mr. Wells, and he swore he would go to Standish and drag her from the court-room ; and the good wife and mother, fearing that he might make matters worse than they were, decided to accompany him. The merchant and his wife made their way to the center of the court-room, where they were compelled to stand, for no seat could be found that was not already occupied, while hundreds of others were standing all about them.

"I don't see her anywhere," said Mr. Wells to his wife.

"Perhaps after all she did not come," whispered Mrs. Wells, with a sigh of relief.

But the sharp eyes of the merchant at last espied a veiled figure in a corner near the bar seated by the side of a corpulent old lady, whom he recognized as Aunt Rachel.

"There she is now;" and Mr. Wells began elbowing his way across the court-room to the veiled figure.

"*Flora!*" he hissed, hoarse with rage, on gaining her side—"why are you here? Come away at once!"

With low sobs and tears she answered:

"Father, I cannot."

Poor girl, her heart was rent in twain.

She loved her father and longed to obey his every wish, but she could not desert Horace now.

The father, white with passion, bent over her and hissed:

"Flora, if you don't come away with me, I swear by the Heaven above that I will disinherit you!"

"I wish I could obey you, father, not from fear of disinheritance; but I cannot go."

A tall, giant countryman, in shirt sleeves, with his jeans pants in his cowhide boot-tops, who had elbowed his way into the court-room, and was near enough to hear the voice of the merchant without comprehending a word he said, and being somewhat pugilistic from liquor, at this moment put in with:

"Say, old feller, wot ye jawin' that leetle gal fur? Want 'er t' give ye her seat, do ye? Now, dog on yer lazy pictur', leave her alone an' stand like me."

With swelling indignation, the merchant turned on the countryman, and said:

"Mind your own business!"

"Don't ye give me any o' yer slack, ur I'll pitch ye out o' ther winder!"

Some friends near the giant interposed to quiet him, or he might have carried out his threat. Mr. Wells went back to his wife, saying:

"I can't do anything with her. You go and try."

Mrs. Wells was a brave little woman, and it was at some risk that she made her way through the "jeans pants" and "cowhide boots" to her daughter.

"Flora, won't you come away with your mother?" Mrs. Wells asked.

Sobbing bitterly, the girl answered:

"Mother, if it was father, would you leave him? Would you not think it cruel if you should be dragged from his side at such an awful moment?"

"Yes."

"Then please don't ask me to go."

Mrs. Wells looked about for her husband, but he was lost in the surging tide of humanity.

"Silence in Court!" cried the bailiff.

The Judge opened the Motion Docket, and some time was spent in calling up motions and disposing of them. A few technical questions of law, in which the attorneys had a chance to air their legal knowledge, were discussed, then the Judge declared the

motion hour over, and turning to the Criminal Docket, called:

"'State of Missouri *versus* Horace Rathburne.' Is the defendant in Court, Mr. Sheriff?"

"No, sir; I can have him here in a moment."

"Bring him in at once."

The Judge then called up some little unimportant matters, and questioned several attorneys in regard to them; there rose a little discussion, during which the prisoner was brought in. Horace was very pale, but calm and unmoved. Flora sent a boy to Colonel Hale with a note, and the Colonel, who was on familiar terms with the Judge, went to him and asked him something in a whisper, to which his Honor was heard to say: "Certainly." The Colonel motioned to Flora; she came forward and took a seat by the prisoner.

Mr. Wells was heard to say:

"She is determined to go to the devil," and clapping his hat on his head, hurried from the court-room; but the gentle little mother stole into the bar and took a seat near her child. The Judge saw the act, but was too much moved by it to rebuke her.

Horace was told to stand up. The indictment was read to him, and the Judge asked him if he was guilty or not guilty.

"Not guilty!" he answered, in a clear, ringing tone.

"Be seated. Now, gentlemen, are you ready for trial?"

A moment's confusion, with some little legal

sparring, followed, and then both prosecution and defense announced themselves ready. Several reporters for the St. Louis, Chicago and Kansas City dailies were present, who did not neglect the sensational part of the trial. Flora's refusal to be driven from her lover by her angry father was described in glowing headlines, and many a pretty actress's picture was used to represent the features of the outlaw's sweetheart.

Nearly the entire day was taken up in impaneling a jury. After the jury was impaneled, the Court charged them not to discuss the case with any one, or with one another, put them in charge of a deputy sheriff, and the Court adjourned until next day.

"Where is father?" Flora asked, turning to her mother, when the prisoner had been taken back to jail.

"Perhaps he has gone home," Mrs. Wells answered.

"Mother, won't you stay with me?"

"Yes, dear."

Taking Colonel Hale aside, the anxious girl said:

"What do you think of the chances of an acquittal, cousin?"

"We will do our best," he answered, gravely.

"Has the man on the roan horse with the black ear been found?"

"Not yet."

"Heaven grant he may," she said, and turning to her mother, went with her to the hotel where she and Aunt Rachel were stopping.

As a pebble may change the current of a river, so small things may turn the tide of public opinion. The action of Flora Wells began to have its effect on the public. They came to admire the brave girl who refused to desert her lover in adversity. Some thought, if she had such confidence in his innocence, perhaps he was not guilty. Those who had once been most firm in the belief that he ought to be hung, began to doubt, and from doubting became convinced he must be innocent.

Next morning at the opening hour the jurymen were all in their seats, the prisoner in his place, his sweetheart, very pretty but pale, on one side and Colonel Hale on the other, while Mrs. Wells sat just back of them. It was an impressive sight, and even the stern Judge was moved by it. After the panel had been called, the prosecuting attorney, with his scornful lips and thin, twitching nostrils, rose to open the case.

"May it please the Court and gentlemen of the jury," he began, and proceeded to tell what the "State" expected to prove, giving the story of the robbery and the manner in which the defendant was connected with it, all of which has been detailed to the reader. When he had concluded, the Judge said:

"Call the witnesses for the State."

The clerk, with a list of the witnesses on the back of a subpœna, rose from his desk and called:

"Enoch Ralls, Jack Auglin, Cris Martin, John Layman, Ben Dougan, Gabriel Hart, Mollie Burton,

Samuel Denton," continuing until fifteen persons rose and stood before him in line to be sworn.

When this ceremony had been performed, Colonel Hale rose and said:

"May it please the Court, under the rule, I ask for a severance of the witnesses."

Mr. Crompton, with an almost scornful expression of features, sniffed the air and suggested that the same rule might apply to the defense.

"We have no witnesses in the court-room now," answered Colonel Hale.

Mr. Crompton looked about him, sniffed the air, and said that should any come in during the trial the order must be enforced against them. The Judge assured him it would, and they proceeded:

"Whom will you have first?" asked the Judge.

"Enoch Ralls."

All other witnesses for the prosecution were told to retire from the court-room, but wait within call when wanted, and Enoch took the stand. After the usual preliminary in important cases, telling where he lived and how long he had lived there, and what he did to support himself and family, he came down to the date of the robbery, and stated that he and "some o' the boys were a-settin' on the porch, and saw strangers come into town," and then followed the pretended horse deal; and he told how two men had dismounted and gone into the bank to get a bill changed, and while he was showing Jack how well the dark-brown "hoss was quartered an' what a fine chist he had, they begin yellin' and shootin'. The defendant was ridin' a skittish hoss, which throwed

him just as witness and Jack ran into each other and fell. The defendant fell on Enoch's back, and a'most knocked the breath clean out o' him. The wig and whiskers came off, and he saw his face before he had time to jump up behind the other feller and gallop away."

"You saw his face?" said Mr. Crompton.

"Jist as plain ez I see your'n now," answered Enoch, with a nasal drawl.

"Who was he?"

"He wuz Horace Rathburne."

"The prisoner at the bar?"

"Yes, sir; that feller settin' thar."

"You are quite sure that you are not mistaken?"

"Oh, I know I hain't mistaken."

"Take the witness," said Mr. Crompton, elevating his nose as if he had completed the case and there was no further need of delay.

Colonel Hale proceeded to cross-examine the witness.

"Did the man fall very heavily?"

"Wall, he knocked me flat."

"Did you fall on your back or face?"

"I fell on my face."

"How do you remember you fell on your face?"

"I jammed my mouth, nose an' eyes in the dust."

"Can a man see with his eyes full of dust?"

"Yes, ef he ain't got too much in 'em."

"Can he see as well with any dust in his eyes as without?"

"No, I reckon he can't," scratching his head.

"And yet you swear positively you knew the

man, though you had dust in your eyes, was stunned by the fall, and his face visible but two or three seconds?"

"Dog on et, I didn't see what ye waz a drivin' at," answered Enoch, rubbing his bald head.

"Never mind what I am driving at. I want to see what you are driving at."

"Wall, Kernel, I could see well enuff t' tell it wuz Horace Rathburne. I ain't got nuthin' agin him; we never had any fuss, but I hain't goin t' lie t' save anybody."

"No one wants you to lie, Mr. Ralls. We only want to know if there may not be a doubt as to the man you saw. There is such a thing as mistaken identity."

"Wall, thar hain't no mistaken identity 'bout this. I know et war him."

All efforts to shake the positiveness of the witness were in vain. Flora, whose hopes had fluctuated during the cross-examination, was in despair when Enoch Ralls left the stand. Mr. Crompton next called Jack Auglin.

This witness was better in some particulars than Enoch, though he was just a little less certain than the preceding witness. He told about the same story, and ended it with the recognition of the defendant. Colonel Hale tried to trip him on cross-examination, but all in vain, and he left the stand with a strong impression on the minds of the jury that he had told a truth.

Witness after witness testified, and Flora was in despair. She occasionally turned her white face

appealingly to the Judge or jury, but usually stared at the witnesses. Such a web of indisputable testimony was woven about the defendant that it seemed impossible for him ever to extricate himself from it. His face was firm but very pale. He seldom glanced at the witnesses, jury or court; his eyes were continually on Flora's white face. The sheriff was at last put on the stand to testify to some unimportant matter, and when Colonel Hale came to cross-examine him, he asked:

"Do you know what became of the horse which threw the robber?"

"Yes, sir, I have it my barn."

"What is the color of the horse?"

"A dark bay, with a star in its forehead."

Nothing seemed to have been gained by the cross-examination. The day was almost spent when the prosecution closed, having made one of the clearest cases ever known in that Court.

Flora heard two lawyers not engaged in the case talking in whispers about the probable result

"What do you think of it?" one asked.

"He 'll get twenty-five years."

"He 'll be hanged before he starts to Jefferson," returned the other. Those careless, idle words went like daggers to the heart of Flora.

When called upon to open for the defense, Colonel Hale rose and said that, owing to the lateness of the hour, he would ask for a postponement until the next morning, especially as he wanted to consult with his client and associate counsel in regard to the line of defense they would adopt.

Flora did not know what he was asking; her ears were humming and her eyes swimming with tears. She turned to the window to conceal her emotion. The window was open, for the air was close and stifling. She saw two horsemen riding down the street toward the court-house. At first she gave them a casual glance, and then as one of the men on near approach became familiar, she looked closely at both. One was Josiah Hunt, her discarded suitor, and the other a stranger. She fixed her eyes on Josiah's companion and his steed, and uttered a wild shriek:

"*God be praised! He has come—he has come! The stranger on the roan horse with the black ear!*"

CHAPTER XXXV.

A STRANGE DENOUEMENT.

The prisoner so far forgot himself as to leap to the window to get a glimpse of the long-sought witness to establish his *alibi.* His act was mistaken for an attempt at escape, and a deputy, seizing him by the shoulder, pulled him back to his seat, saying:

"No, ye don't, my fine fellow. Try that again, and dog on my hide and taller if I don't put the nippers on ye."

There was general uproar and confusion. Some

one said the prisoner was trying to escape, and many who had sympathized with him for "his girl's sake," now cried :

"Hang him ! Hang him, or he'll get away !"

Flora screamed and clung to her lover, the sheriff, bailiff and deputies demanded order, and the Judge threatened to fine some one.

Colonel Hale alone kept perfectly cool. He finally got the ear of both Court and audience and appealed for an adjournment until morning. He assured them that the prisoner had only gone to the window to look out, and that what the young woman had said was not a preconcerted signal for him to escape, as was claimed.

"Give us one day for the defense ; it is all we ask," he said.

The Judge thought that was only fair, and the prisoner was taken back to jail, and Court adjourned.

As Flora, plunged in the deepest despair, was taken from the court-room by her mother and Aunt Rachel, she asked her cousin :

"Will you have any witnesses to-morrow ?"

"Wait and we will see," he answered.

At the appointed hour on the following morning the Court resumed its sessions. The attorneys for the State and defense were in their places and the prisoner was brought in. It was remarked that he was paler than the day before, but calm, and evidently resigned to his fate. Flora, accompanied by her mother and Aunt Rachel, entered and took her accustomed place. The reporters, telegraphing the

trial to the great dailies, stated that she was a trifle paler than the day before, and had the appearance of being less hopeful than at any time during the trial.

A rumor had gone forth that a roan horse with a black ear had something to do with the case, and the crowd, if possible, was more dense than on the day before. Men were actually crowding and fighting to get into the court-room.

"Gentlemen for the defense, are you ready?" asked the Judge.

"We are, your Honor."

"Have you any witnesses?"

"There is only one in court; the others will come as we need them. While I am examining this witness, a photographer with a powerful instrument for throwing colored views upon a smooth, white surface will be fitting up his instrument."

Mr. Crompton rose, and with a sneer on his lips wanted to know if the Court was going to resolve itself into a magic-lantern show. Colonel Hale, equally as sarcastic, regretted that the gentleman's scientific education had been neglected, but stated that he wanted to introduce some evidence to the Court and jury which could not be done without the aid of a calcium-light instrument, which he had provided, in order to enlarge and make a perfect figure to be seen by all.

"Proceed, Mr. Hale," said the Judge. "If there is anything inadmissible in the use of this instrument, Mr. Crompton," the Judge added, "I think

I will have sense enough to stop him in time. Call your first witness, Colonel Hale."

"Mr. Hiram Bunce."

Mr. Bunce came forward, was sworn, and took the stand. He was a farmer and lived a few miles from Wellsville. He was forty-six years of age, and knew defendant well. Three days before the robbery at Standish he had sold the defendant a horse. It was a light, sorrel horse, with a mane and tale almost white. After his arrest he had seen the same horse which defendant had sold to Mr. Lyons. It was the same horse which the defendant rode at the time of his arrest. Witness had seen the horse in the possession of the sheriff from which it was said the bandit fell, and it was not like the one he sold defendant.

When Mr. Crompton was told to take the witness, he merely elevated his nose higher in the air and said he did not want him, implying very plainly by his words and manner that what he had stated had no bearing whatever on the case.

"Stand aside," said the Judge. "Now, Colonel Hale, are you ready with your experiment?"

"Yes, let us have the magic-lantern show," put in Crompton, rubbing his hands and sneering.

"Before the court-room is darkened and the instrument put in operation," said the Colonel, "I want to recall Mr. Enoch Ralls."

"If you recall him, he is your witness," put in Crompton quickly, "and you lose all right of cross-examination."

"I waive all such rights."

A platform was ranged on one side of the court-room. Fortunately the opposite wall was smooth, white and unbroken by windows. By this time Enoch Ralls, with a look of wonder on his face, his hat in hand, came into the court-room, and was asked to take the witness-stand.

As the shutters were closed, the room became gradually dark, and the faces of Judge, jury and amazed spectators grew weird and wan among the shadows. Enoch shivered from head to foot, and wanted to know if they were "goin' t' hev a seance?"

"Silence!" cried the Judge, and his voice sounded strange and sepulchral.

A solemn silence and awe fell upon the crowd. Every one expected some awful voice to speak, proclaiming the doom or innocence of the prisoner. All felt as a man might, if conscious of the darkness of the tomb, when waiting for the trump of resurrection and the breaking of everlasting day. Men and women heard their own hearts beat, like the tread of marshalling hosts. Flora clung to her lover and whispered:

"What does it mean?"

The voice of Colonel Hale came out from the darkness, saying:

"I want this witness and the jury to fix their eyes upon the wall on the east side of the court-room. All ready, Mr. Tull, turn on your light and arrange the focus." There was a clicking sound at the instrument, and a great calcium light appeared on the wall, which, as the instrument became properly adjusted, grew more perfect. The lawyer

whispered something to Mr. Tull; there was a click, a sliding sound at the instrument, and the next moment the life-size face and form of the defendant appeared on the wall. He was reclining on the pavement, his head resting against a lamp-post, a pair of false whiskers, wig and revolver lying on the ground at his side, his eyes were closed in death, and the blood streaming from a mortal wound in his breast. So ghastly, terrible, yet so real was the scene that women shrieked, men shuddered, and Flora, clinging to her lover, whispered:

"Horace, Horace, it is not you! It is not you!"

"Mr. Ralls," said the Colonel, "tell me whose image you see on the wall."

After shivering a moment, the witness answered:

"Wall, et looks mighty like Horace."

"Does it not look like the man who fell on your back during the bank robbery?"

"Yes, it does."

"How much like him?"

"Exactly like him."

He was told to stand aside, and Jack Auglin was called for.

"May it please the Court," said Colonel Hale, "there are two persons whom I wish to see this reflection on the wall, if the Court will permit them to come and look at it. I do not care to ask them any questions just now, but perhaps after a while I shall. I want them to see it, however."

The Court granted his request, and General Hawley and Arthur Westfall, of Starkeville, were sent

for. Of course, the attempt at robbing the Hawley bank was fresh on the mind of everybody in the court-room. Arthur's connection with the affair had been so generously misrepresented as to make him a heroic detective, who had joined the banditti for the purpose of entrapping them. Though it was dark when they entered the room, as soon as it became known that Arthur Westfall was present, three rousing cheers were given for the hero of Starkeville.

"Silence! Silence!" shouted the court bailiff; and when order was restored, Colonel Hale's voice was heard saying:

"I hope that all are gazing on the figure on the wall. Do you see it, Jack Auglin?"

"Yes, sir," answered Jack with a shudder.

"Whom does it look like?"

"Why, I believe it looks like Horace, only I don't believe he is shot and dead—is he?"

"Do you think it possible that the man whose image you see on the wall was the same who fell from his horse on the day of the robbery?"

"Wall, he looks like him, 'bout same size, clothes and everything."

"Do you say it is the same?"

"Yes."

"That will do."

The light was turned off, the window shutters open, and the glorious light of the sun once more filled the whole room, driving the ghastly figure from the wall, and revealing the serious and frightened faces of the jurors and spectators.

"Now, may it please the Court," said Colonel Hale, "I want Mr. Tull, the photographer, sworn."

He was sworn and took the witness-stand.

"Tell the jury, Mr. Tull, whose likeness that was reflected on the wall?"

"It was the likeness of one of the three robbers killed two weeks ago while trying to rob the Hawley bank in Starkeville."

"Who made the negative of the dead robber?"

"I did."

"Do you consider the likeness a good one?"

"It is as perfect a likeness as I ever saw," he answered.

"Take the witness, Mr. Crompton."

Mr. Crompton, who saw that his cause was really in danger, was roused like a war-horse and came to the charge. But he found the photographer a barrier not to be easily carried. His evidence was unshaken. General Hawley next took the stand and testified to the same as Mr. Tull. Arthur was called, and stated that the reflection on the wall was an excellent life-size image of Joe Kerry, one of the Missouri bandits whom he had seen on several occasions, who was killed at Starkeville. A cross-examination brought out the fact that witness had been discharged from Mark Hunt's store on the charge of having stolen money from the till.

"He didn't do it!" cried a voice in the court-room, and Josiah Hunt elbowed his way through the crowd toward Court and jury. "No, Judge and gentlemen of the jury, Arthur is innocent of that charge. Ab Nichols is the real thief. He was

caught last week stealing, and confessed to taking the money of which Arthur was accused. The Judge remembers that he held a special term and sent him up for five years."

All the while, Mr. Crompton, who had leaped to his feet, was making furious efforts to stop him, and objecting to outside speeches or unsworn testimony.

"Very well," put in Colonel Hale, when the prosecuting attorney had somewhat subsided, "we will have Mr. Hunt sworn, and he can tell his story over."

"It makes no difference," roared Crompton. "That has no bearing on the case. We are not trying Arthur Westfall, but Horace Rathburne. A dozen witnesses have sworn he was guilty, and all this magic-lantern business is irrelevant, and I object to it."

"Your objection is overruled, Mr. Crompton," said the Judge.

"Then I will save my exceptions. I will see if the Supreme Court will allow magic-lantern testimony."

"Proceed, Colonel Hale," said the Judge, after Mr. Crompton had subsided.

"Call Reverend John Grogan," said Colonel Hale, in a cool, unmoved manner, which went to prove that he was master of the situation. At the name Flora started, clutched her lover's arm and whispered:

"Is it he?"

Horace gazed back along the aisle and saw a

pleasant-faced man, with blue eyes and dark-brown, well-trimmed beard, coming toward the witness-stand.

"It is he," he answered.

Mr. Grogan was sworn and took the stand. He stated that he was a minster of the Gospel in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and was what was called a Circuit Rider.

"Do you remember the day the Standish bank was robbed?" asked Colonel Hale.

"Yes, sir."

"Where were you between three and five o'clock on that afternoon?"

"About twenty-five miles south, or, rather, a little west of south, of this town, going to my appointment to preach the Sabbath following. My appointments are far apart, and I have to travel a great distance to reach some of them."

"Were you alone on that particular afternoon?"

"No, sir."

"Who was with you?"

"A young man named Rathburne."

"Do you remember the kind of a horse he rode?"

"Yes, sir; a sorrel horse with a very light mane and tail."

"How long were you in this man's company?"

"I suppose it was between two and three o'clock in the afternoon when we met, and it was six before we separated."

"If you have any particular reason for knowing it was six, state that reason to the jury."

"I remember, just as we parted, glancing at my

watch to see how much time I had to make it to a member of my Bear Creek charge, and that it was just six o'clock."

"Did you converse much with your travelling companion that afternoon?"

"Yes, sir. We talked nearly all the time we were together."

"On what subject?"

"Science, philosophy, and politics."

"Did Mr. Rathburne say anything about himself?"

"Yes, sir—said he had been clerking for Mr. Jordan Wells of Wellsville."

"How long since he had quit?"

"I don't remember that he told me exactly; nevertheless, he left the impression on my mind that he had very recently left his employ."

"Now, Mr. Grogan, look about the room and inform the jury if you recognize your travelling companion of that afternoon."

"There he is!" the witness immediately answered, pointing to the defendant.

"Take the witness."

Crompton, with the energy of despair, plied the witness with questions on cross-examination, to try to make him contradict himself, or shake his certainty, but all to no purpose. Seeing that he was gaining nothing, he at last said:

"That will do."

"Call your next, Colonel Hale."

"May it please the Court, we rest," said Colonel Hale.

"Have you anything in rebuttal, Mr. Crompton?"

"I believe not, your Honor."

"Gentlemen of the jury, give attention while I read the instructions."

According to the law in Missouri, the Judge read his instructions to the jury, which he had written, defining the law in this particular case. Among other things, he said they must believe the accused guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of the offense charged before they could find him guilty, defining a reasonable doubt to be a substantial doubt growing out of the evidence and not a mere suspicion of his innocence. The jury were instructed that they might consider the reflection of the dead outlaw thrown upon the wall, and the evidence of others concerning it, with the admissions of Ralls and Auglin, and if they believed there was a mistake in the identity of Ralls and Auglin, and that the dead outlaw might have been the person they saw instead of the defendant, they were to find him not guilty. In fact, the evidence and instructions of the Court were so clearly against the prosecution that Mr. Crompton offered to dismiss the case, but Colonel Hale insisted on a verdict of the jury for two reasons: First, it would be a bar to any other prosecution for the same offense; second, it would more completely vindicate the defendant in the public mind. So, without argument, the case went to the jury.

The Colonel was really a power in the law. He was the only man in the court-room who was perfectly composed. The crowd was completely revo-

lutionized in opinion, and as ready to carry the accused out on their shoulders as they were a few moments before to hang him. Flora could not understand what it all meant, and dread of a conviction at last clung like ice at her heart.

Like one in a dream, Horace sat gazing on her face. He was conscious of the jury retiring, of a subdued uproar for a few moments, then of the jury filing into the room again.

"Silence!" cried the court bailiff.

When order was partially restored, the clerk rose and called the names of the jurors, and each answered.

"Gentlemen, have you found a verdict?" asked the Judge.

"We have, your Honor," answered the foreman handing him a slip of paper.

The Judge opened the paper and read:

"We, the jury, find the defendant not guilty—" that was as far as he could be heard. Wild yells and cheers drowned his voice, but tears were seen coursing down his cheeks.

"Free, free—oh, God be praised!" shrieked Flora, swooning in her lover's arms.

The scene that followed is beyond description. Some wept and some shouted and danced for joy. Horace heard not the tumult that raged about him, for he was bending over the insensible girl to whose love and devotion he owed his present liberty.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CONCLUSION.

Horace Rathburne never exactly knew how they reached the hotel. His vision was blurred, objects were dimly seen, and the voices of those about him sounded unreal and far away. He could not have told whether the sun shone or not; he was dazed, confused and could scarcely believe himself awake.

They were in the hotel; he was bending over a cot on which Flora had been laid. One arm supported her head, and a doctor was administering restoratives and assuring the weeping mother that she was coming "out of it." He made some remark about nervous strain and reaction. Aunt Rachel ran from hall to hall, room to room and up and down the flight of stairs, making the walls echo with her shouts:

"Th' camp-fire, git the camp-fire—she 's fainted! Where iz yer camp-fire?" until some one told her the doctor was doing all that could be done and no camphor was needed.

Mr. Wells, sitting on a curbstone mopping his florid brow with his handkerchief, was frequently heard to mutter:

"Well, it does beat all creation! I did the fellow

an injustice, but Flora more than made up for my sins."

Gradually Flora regained her consciousness, and when she first opened her eyes they fell upon the faces of the two she loved most, Horace and her mother. She raised her feeble arms, and placing them about the neck of each, drew them toward her, and whispered:

"Is it real, or a dream?"

"It is real," he answered.

She was soon able to sit up, and, looking about, asked:

"Where is papa?"

Aunt Rachel, having been at last convinced that "camp-fire" was not needed, volunteered to go and find Jordan. He was found, and, by earnest persuasions, brought into the presence of his daughter, who, taking his hands in her own, pulled him down to her, kissed his cheek, and whispered:

"Papa, Horace is innocent!"

"I know it," he answered, and turning, he grasped his former clerk's hand, and added: "Horace, I've been a blamed fool. Forgive the past, and you can be head salesman in my store, if you want the place."

"The past is forgiven, Mr. Wells, but my plans are not formed yet."

At this moment a brass band, accompanied by a thousand men and boys, shouting and yelling, was heard coming down the street. They stopped in front of the hotel and called so loudly for Horace and Flora that they were compelled to make their

appearance, and the crowd cheered until all were hoarse. Horace stepped out onto the hotel veranda and thanked the people for their kindness in the expression of sympathy and joy they had demonstrated. He found himself talking with ease, even eloquently, as he warned them against hasty judgment, and advised the exercise of the law in punishing men suspected of a crime. He had no doubt but that this was the same crowd that had gathered about the jail to hang him, and thought it a good opportunity to give them a lecture. His speech surprised no one more than himself, for he had never dreamed that he possessed any ability as an orator. When Colonel Hale was called on for a speech, he declared that he was unable to say as much as the young man who had preceded him. He hoped they would remember what he had said, and always wait until both sides of a case were heard before they formed or expressed an opinion.

At last the crowd dispersed and our friends went down to dinner, where Horace was formally introduced to Arthur Westfall and General Hawley. Josiah Hunt, the man who had found the mysterious roan horse with a black ear, joined them, and declared the outcome of the trial more enjoyable than a booming fall trade.

"By the way, Arthur," he added, "if you want the best place in our store you can have it."

"My plans are not formed—" began Arthur.

"Why, my dear fellow, you have just been chosen cashier of the Hawley Bank, at thirty-five hundred per year," declared General Hawley. "No dry-

goods house outside the city can pay you that salary!"

Arthur looked up in surprise and asked:

"Would you really intrust me with so responsible a position?"

"I would. I do; it is all settled."

A friendship naturally sprang up between Horace and Arthur, and they were late together that night when all others had retired, each telling his own story.

"Will you be prosecuted?" Horace asked.

"Colonel Hale assures me not. Everybody will have it that I was a detective at the beginning, and joined the band to work their capture. If I should be arrested, or charged with the crime, I would be pardoned by the Governor, who knows it all."

"And this Miss Hawley, whose pretty ears you saved from the bandit's knife, and whom you fell in love with at first sight—have you proposed to her?"

"No, no!" gasped Arthur, trembling at the thought.

"Why don't you?"

"How could I dare, when she knows what I have been?"

"My dear friend, you don't realize the height and depth and strength of a woman's love. It is boundless as space, and, like charity, covers a multitude of sins. Propose, marry her, and be happy."

"Oh, if I dared! If I could only hope to win her I would be the happiest of all living men!"

"You can; you must, or you will make both yourself and her miserable," said Horace.

Next morning, Colonel Hale came to his client and said:

"Young man, you are poor and in love. Jordan Wells is rich, and, I have no doubt, will settle a handsome dower on his daughter; but you are too proud to accept that. A clerkship will give you a living, but no more. Now, I have watched you closely through the most trying ordeal one ever passed, and I noted that your coolness, judgment and sagacity will make you an excellent lawyer. My practice is growing too large for me; if you will enter upon the study of law, I will see you through, and the day you are admitted will make you a full partner. On that same day you can marry the girl whose love you can never doubt."

The whole matter was arranged then and there, and when Mr. Wells heard of it he declared:

"All right! If John says you 'll make a lawyer, you will. He knows all about it."

Horace accompanied Flora Wells and her parents home, and after a day or two spent among friends and acquaintances, took the train for Starkeville to commence his studies. It is needless to say that he lost no time, and that the progress he made astonished even Colonel Hale, who had expected much of him. One day the Colonel told him that he was to accompany him on a matter of business.

They set out in a buggy, drawn by a span of fine bays, across the country to the home of George Weatherby. Mr. Weatherby lived a retired life, never read a newspaper, and had learned nothing of his nephew's saving the bank or being declared

innocent of the Mark Hunt robbery. The whole aim and intent of Mr. Weatherby now was to dispose of his property, go to Virginia, seize the estate of his nephew, and hide himself.

The only weapon Colonel Hale carried with him was the registered letter taken from the train when it was robbed. The days had grown shorter and much colder, and the lawyer and the student wore heavy overcoats. There had been no snow yet, but the frost of the night before lay on the blades of dead grass and fences, and the cold, icy blasts of winter swept through the barren branches of the denuded trees along the road.

When they reached the Weatherby house they found the whole place a scene of confusion. Household treasures were being boxed and got ready for shipment, and the family was to go in a day or two.

"Are you Mr. Weatherby?" asked Colonel Hale, approaching a sharp-visaged, eagle-eyed old man who stood in the yard, giving orders about the boxing of his goods.

"Yes. What ye want with me?"

"What we have to say is of a private nature."

Weatherby looked around uneasily, wondered what "th' dum fool is drivin' at," and asked them to come in the house. When they were in the sitting-room, now almost bare of furniture, Colonel Hale said:

"You have a nephew named Arthur Westfall?"

"Yes, a worthless, onnery, good-fur-nuthin' cuss, who stole money out o' Mark Hunt's till—"

"No; beg pardon, Mr. Weatherby. Mr. Hunt has discovered the real thief, who is now in the penitentiary for the crime. Your nephew is innocent."

"Wall, he's onnery az darnation anyway, an' run off an' no one knows where he is—"

"No; beg pardon again. He is in Starkeville."

"Wall, I hain't agoin' t' maintain him furever. He's no account an' won't work."

"He doesn't ask aid of you, for he has an excellent position in the Hawley bank at a princely salary."

"Then what th' deuce ye botherin' me about him fur?"

"I wanted to ask you if your nephew is not heir to some property in Virginia?"

"No, his people war pore az church mice."

"But he had a snug little fortune of something over five hundred thousand dollars coming to him, and you were his guardian."

"Who told you that?"

"Your lawyer, Allen Cravensford."

"It 's false."

"Well, here is a copy of a letter. I have the original; the copy will serve for you," and he handed him a copy of the letter to read, which he did. He was thunderstruck, and pale as a ghost, while he trembled from head to foot. At last breaking forth in a rage, he cried:

"It 's all a pack of falsehoods."

"But, my dear sir, Mr. Cravensford has been seen; the whole matter investigated in Virginia, and now

you must either sign this paper or go to the penitentiary for swindling and embezzling the property of your ward."

Mr. Weatherby raved and swore at the fates which compelled him to part with that which he believed he had "honestly stolen," but Colonel Hale was inexorable as fate. Like a bull-dog when he has once set his teeth into his victim, he clung to him with a death-grip. It resulted in his signing the paper which released all his rights in the estate of his ward, now of age.

"Now, sir, you must come with me," said the lawyer.

"Whar?"

"We will go to a notary and have this acknowledged."

"Why, what's th' use?"

"Oh, it's only a whim of mine; come on. You can go either with me or with the sheriff."

Weatherby was a coward, and the word "sheriff" sent a cold shiver through his frame. He sprang into the buggy and they drove into the village, had the paper acknowledged and attested by the notarial seal of the officer, and then the Colonel sent a telegram to some one in Virginia, and received for answer:

"All right!"

The paper was then sent by registered letter, and a few weeks later Arthur was apprised of the fact that a handsome fortune awaited his order. The real estate was sold for a good round sum, and with the proceeds he bought a half-interest in the Haw-

ley Bank, of which he was already the popular cashier.

* * * * * *

A few words more and the story will be finished. Meeker, by the influence of strong friends, got off with only ten years in the penitentiary, and died of consumption, shame and remorse before half the term was served out.

After the ineffectual effort to rob the Hawley Bank, the Missouri banditti for a long time disappeared from the State. Though Arthur received some anonymous letters threatening his life, he was never molested, and soon ceased to fear them. In time he renewed his calls at the Hawley mansion and came to love Grace more and more, and one evening, in a fit of desperation, proposed, and was in due time accepted. They were married, and settled down to what is hoped will be a long and happy life. General Hawley has retired from business and spends his time with his grandchildren, of whom there are five—three sturdy boys and two girls, who promise to be as beautiful as their mother. Mrs. Westfall is still youthful, still handsome, the favorite of their wide circle of friends, and the idol of her husband. Sometimes, as he fondles her pretty ears, he thinks that, after all, it was well that he served an apprenticeship at train-robbing, for how else could he have saved them from the bandit's knife?

The day Horace Rathburne was admitted to practice in the courts of Missouri, Flora Wells became his wife, and he was at once admitted into full

partnership with Colonel Hale. As Arthur and Horace were friends, their wives, from mutual sympathy, also became intimate. Their children grew up and became friends, until the two families were almost inseparable.

Hale & Rathburne ere long became one of the strongest legal firms in Missouri, the junior partner proving himself the equal of the senior, proving that Colonel John Hale had made no mistake when he said that he was a born lawyer. The halo of romance which had hovered about the young attorney, and the general sympathy which the public feels toward one who has been greatly wronged, made him a general favorite. Mr. Wells, from having a son-in-law of whom he was ashamed, came to have a son-in-law of whom he was justly proud. As years rolled on and the popularity of young Rathburne increased, he was induced to embark in the field of politics. The Congressional district in which he lived had been represented by an old, superannuated fossil, a worn-out politician, and the people clamored for a change. Young Rathburne was named for his place, and was elected by an overwhelming majority. In his new field as a statesman he bids fair to surpass himself as a lawyer.

We must not forget the old Newburg tavern and its odd proprietors. The tavern is to-day tenanted only by owls and bats, or a stray sheep that may wander thither during the hot summer days. The window panes are nearly all broken out; the shutters are off or hang by one hinge, and the old house is in the last stages of decay, while on the hill above

sleep its owners and their two faithful servants. Uncle Reuben Price sat day after day in his old arm-chair, waiting for a return of business, for which he hoped to the last. One day he was silent longer than usual, and Aunt Rachel noticed that his pipe had fallen from his hand and his head lay on his left arm. She shook him, and was shocked to find him stiff and cold. She called loudly for help, but Uncle Reuben would wait no more for the return of Newburg's glory. The stage-horn would never make music for his ears again. Aunt Rachel followed him soon, and the faithful servants a year or two later. The forest has swallowed up the old road, and the ruin of the old tavern is all that is left to mark the place where Newburg stood.

In the spring of 1882 the whole country was shocked at a murder in St. Joseph, Missouri. Mr. Thomas Howard, his wife and two children lived quietly in a neat little cottage at No. 1318 Lafayette street. Two young men, supposed to be relatives or friends, came to live with them. Mrs. Howard was spoken of as an estimable lady, frequently seen at church and Sunday-school with her children. One day, while the wife was cleaning house, the husband thought to assist her, and was standing on a chair with a feather duster, brushing a picture on the wall, when one of the young men stepped behind him and shot him through the head. The wife, who was preparing dinner, rushed in, in time to hold his head while he breathed his last. Both young men were arrested, gave their names as Bob and Charles Ford, and told the world that he whom

they had slain was *Jesse W. James*, the great bandit chief of Missouri. When the house was searched, an old trunk was found, among other things, with the name "F. Wells" on the end.

Mrs. Flora Rathburne read the story in the daily paper while she rocked the cradle in which her first-born slept. Gently folding the paper so as not to disturb the sleeping infant, she laid it aside and, with moistened eyes, said:

"So he was the mysterious Mr. Howard!"

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